SEPT.

20¢

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

TEXAS RANGERS

AND

FEATURING **LOST RIVER LOOT**

A JIM HATFIELD ACTION NOVEL BY **JACKSON COLE**

RO-BERT FASHIONS

Style No. 1105
Enhance your chance with *him* in this "can't do without" front panelled gem of a topper — Two generous slit pockets curve into front panel — Large gold tone button closes just below a jaunty collar. Turn around and show a full flared swing back. In finest quality rayon gabardine.

COLORS:
- NAVY
- RED
- AQUA
- WHITE
- PINK
- KELLY GREEN
- MAIZE

Style No. 1104
A morning — noon and night topper you'll take with you everywhere. The sweep of the front yoke is topped with three large gold-tone buttons and a jaunty collar. Graceful flares fall from the matching back yoke. Large patch pockets. In finest quality rayon gabardine.

Just Imagine!

ONLY 3.99 EACH

SIZES:
9, 11, 13, 15, 17
12, 14, 16, 18, 20
38, 40, 42, 44, 46

COLORS:
- NAVY
- RED
- AQUA
- WHITE
- PINK
- KELLY GREEN
- MAIZE

IN ALL SIZES:
9, 11, 13, 15, 17
10, 12, 14,
16, 18, 20
5.99

38, 40, 42,
44, 46
6.99

Style No. 1505

"DRAMATIC GLORY"

Exciting as a candlelight kiss, romantic as a moonlight stroll! The rich smooth rayon drapes softly over your shoulders . . . the alluring neckline plunges recklessly to reveal your warmly enticing loveliness. Lavish accordion pleats completely encircle the whirling ballerina skirt . . . Luxurious wide self belt with six gold-tone eyelets. Zipper placket.

COLORS: • BLACK • AQUA • PINK • POWDER BLUE

RO-BERT FASHIONS, Dept. TF9
6 West 20th Street, New York 10, N. Y.
Please rush the following items as illustrated. If not delighted, I may return purchases within 10 days for full refund.

Style No.	Size	1st Color Choice	2nd Color Choice	Price
1104				3.99
1105				3.99
1505				

☐ I enclose full amount plus 21¢, saving C.O.D. charges.
☐ Send C.O.D. I'll pay full amount plus postage and shipping.

Name .....
Address .....
City ..... Zone ..... State .....

SEND NO MONEY-10 DAY FREE TRIAL

NOW!

Industry needs *trained* men—needs them NOW!

Can you qualify for the premium jobs that are open to trained draftsmen, machinists, technicians?

You can, if you start preparing yourself immediately. And the International Correspondence Schools can help you.

Just mark and mail the coupon below. We'll rush you full information about practical, easy-to-understand I. C. S. Courses—courses being used by many defense industries to train their own workers.

The time for action is NOW!

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 3968-V, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course BEFORE which I have marked X:

- ☐ Accounting and Management
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Automobiles
- ☐ Chemistry
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engr.
- ☐ High School
- ☐ Mechanical and Steam Engineering
- ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Radio & Television
- ☐ Salesmanship
- ☐ Shop Practice
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping
- ☐ Textiles

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemical Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing ☐ Television
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Aviation ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineer's, Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting ☐ Flight Engr.
- ☐ Forging ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Railroad
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding Engineering
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Loom Fixing ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Stationary Eng'r'g Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking ☐ Combustion Engr.
- ☐ Engine Running ☐ Marine Engr.
- ☐ Power Plant Engineering

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Advertising ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Bus. Correspondence ☐ Bus. Law
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ French ☐ Good English
- ☐ Higher Mathematics ☐ Illustration
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Motor Traffic ☐ Postal Civil Service
- ☐ Retailing ☐ Retail Bus. Management
- ☐ Secretarial ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management
- ☐ Typewriting

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to_____ P.M.

Present Position_____ Employed by_____

Special tuition rates to members of the Armed Forces. Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

VOL. 44, NO. 1 SEPTEMBER, 1951

A New Complete Novel

LOST RIVER LOOT.....Jackson Cole 10
Twenty years the hidden gold lay buried—then both Jim Hatfield and an outlaw arrived to unearth it!

Two New Short Stories

THE MAN FROM RED DOG.....James D. Lucey 63
Here is a tough candidate for the Tall Tales Club
LOOK AHEAD—HORSE THIEF.....Cy Kees 88
An old outlaw finds a young child in the wilderness

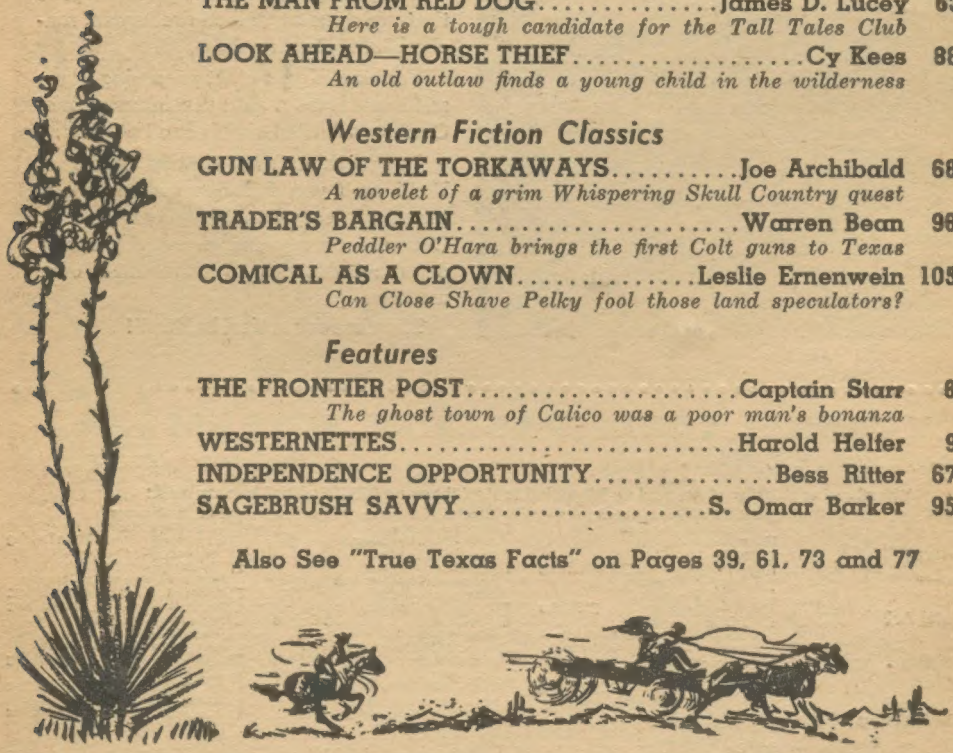
Western Fiction Classics

GUN LAW OF THE TORKAWAYS.....Joe Archibald 68
A novelet of a grim Whispering Skull Country quest
TRADER'S BARGAIN.....Warren Bean 96
Peddler O'Hara brings the first Colt guns to Texas
COMICAL AS A CLOWN.....Leslie Ernenwein 105
Can Close Shave Pelky fool those land speculators?

Features

THE FRONTIER POST.....Captain Starr 6
The ghost town of Calico was a poor man's bonanza
WESTERNETTES.....Harold Helfer 9
INDEPENDENCE OPPORTUNITY.....Bess Ritter 67
SAGEBRUSH SAVVY.....S. Omar Barker 95

Also See "True Texas Facts" on Pages 39, 61, 73 and 77



"Gun Law of the Torkaways," Copyright, 1941, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in March, 1942, Popular Western. "Trader's Bargain," Copyright, 1945, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in November, 1945, Rio Kid Western. "Comical as a Clown," Copyright, 1946, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in December, 1946, Rio Kid Western.

TEXAS RANGERS. Published monthly by Better Publications, Inc., at 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription yearly $2.40; single copies 20c. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Re-entered as second-class matter April 9, 1946, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1951, by Better Publications, Inc. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any real person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number, if any. September, 1951, issue. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

Be Protected in case of SICKNESS or ACCIDENT

HERE'S AN AMAZING NEW HOSPITALIZATION PLAN

NO TIME LIMIT

ON HOSPITAL ROOM AND BOARD

Policy Pays as Long as You Stay!

MAIL COUPON BELOW

Accidental Death and POLIO COVERAGE INCLUDED!

COSTS ONLY 3¢ A DAY

Individual or Family Eligible . . . Birth to Age 70

This is it! Sold only by mail! America's newest and greatest Hospitalization Plan. Amazing coverage! Lower cost! Good anywhere in the U.S. It's exactly what you need!

If you get sick or have an accident, you may go to any recognized Hospital (Rest Homes, Sanitariums, Government Hospitals excluded). Your NORTH AMERICAN Policy will pay for Hospital Room, Board and General Nursing Care at the rate of **$150.00** PER MONTH. What's more, you can stay as long as necessary. There's NO TIME LIMIT. Now, in case you need SURGERY, due to sickness, accident or disease . . . the Policy pays lump CASH for 74 specific SURGICAL OPERATIONS. What a help . . . what a blessing it is to fall back on this kind of coverage in time of need.

LOOK WHAT ELSE YOU GET!

For ACCIDENTAL DEATH Policy pays in lieu of other benefits **$500.00** . . . with a special provision giving 4 times the amount—or **$2,000.00**—for death resulting from accident while traveling on a common carrier. But this isn't all. For still more protection, seldom included in ordinary Hospitalization—you and insured family members also get POLIO coverage in lieu of other benefits—**$500.00** to cover HOSPITAL BILLS, **$500.00** for MEDICAL TREATMENT, **$500.00** for ORTHOPEDIC APPLIANCES.

Then, too, there are liberal Benefits in lieu of others for accidental LOSS OF HANDS, FEET OR EYES; Benefits for EMERGENCY HOSPITAL TREATMENT for accidents involving no confinement, etc. Imagine all this wonderful value and coverage at a rate for adults of only about 3¢ a day, 1½¢ a day for children to age 18 . . . and CHILDREN GET FULL BENEFITS. (Maternity Rider is available at small additional charge.)

IMPORTANT—The NORTH AMERICAN POLICY pays you FULL BENEFITS regardless of money you collect from other insurance sources for the same disability, including Workmen's Compensation. WE PAY DIRECT TO YOU! This means, if you are already carrying Hospitalization—be smart . . . buy this additional Policy, with its extra cash benefits, to protect yourself against today's higher Hospital costs. Don't Delay! MAIL COUPON BELOW for FREE DETAILS. No Agent will call!

NEW FEATURES! EXCLUSIVE EXTRAS! NO FINER PROTECTION FOR YOU & YOUR FAMILY

SICKNESS OR ACCIDENT

SPECIFIC SURGICAL BENEFITS

LOSS OF HANDS, EYES, FEET

INFANTILE PARALYSIS BENEFITS

FREE!
MAIL THIS COUPON

Truly this is a remarkable Hospitalization Plan. Investigate it! Buy it! Mail coupon for complete details.

NO OBLIGATION.
NO AGENT WILL CALL.

North American Mutual INSURANCE COMPANY

Dept. 951-TG, North American Building, Wilmington 99, Delaware

Please send me without obligation full details about the new North American Hospitalization Plan. No Agent will call.

Name .....

Address .....

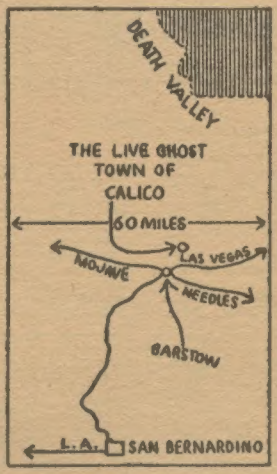
City ..... State .....

(Paste on penny postcard or mail in envelope)

The Poor Man's Bonanza

IF YOU look for the town of Calico on a map of California, you won't find it. But there was a time, back when William Jennings Bryan tried so hard to be President, that Calico was famous. It was a boomtown that produced 86 millions in silver from 1881 to 1897. If you have a dime, quarter or half-dollar of those dates or in between, it is very likely made of Calico silver.

In the half-century that followed, Calico became a ghost town and was forgotten. But it's coming back, just as the old-timers insisted it would. Not as a silver producer, but as a "live ghost town," an authentic restoration of the rip-roaring Helldorado it was in the old days. The idea is to make Calico a big tourist attraction.



The man who is bringing Calico back to life is Walter Knott, who spent some of his early years as a homesteader in that part of the Mojave Desert.

Knott has bought the original townsite of 75 acres and the surrounding mines. He has appointed as "mayor," one Calico Fred, who wears a six-gun and inhabits one of the old adobes.

Also employed is an architect and artist named Paul Klieben, who figures he'll spend the next 10 years in completing the restoration. Even the 30-odd miles of shafts and tunnels will be made safe for visitors to poke around in.

The town got its name from the brightly-tinted Calico Mountains, where it's located at the end of a rugged, dusty road a few miles northeast of Barstow, between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, Nevada. The Calico Mountains look a lot like the colorful ranges of Death Valley, 60 or 70 roadless miles to the north. Calico is hot and dry, with a healthy climate for those who are healthy enough to stand it, as they say on the desert. One of Klieben's problems will be to produce a water supply. In the old days, water was mostly hauled in.

The mail was carried by a dog for awhile. The town has a newspaper, The Calico Print, backed by an enterprising stage driver, Dad Dalameter, who drove a six-horse team between Calico and Daggett. A few copies of the slap-bang pioneer newspaper are still in existence and worth plenty to collectors of relics and curios.

In 1897 the price of silver plunged from $1.31 to 63c an ounce. The Calico boom busted. Two blocks of business buildings, a new schoolhouse, a thriving cemetery, dance halls, two dozen saloons and hundreds of shacks were deserted.

Silver is around 90c now, but the high-grade ore has pinched out, so that prospects are dim.

The ghost town stands in a gash in the hills called Odessa Canyon. But the first silver strike was made in a nearby canyon called Wall Street. The bullion was exceptionally pure, making it suitable for coinage, so practically all the ingots were shipped to the San Francisco mint. Not all miners prospered, but several rose to prominence. Calico supplied California with two governors—Markham and Waterman, also Lieutenant-Governor Daggett.

The Calico silver boom led to the discovery of borax in nearby Mule Canyon in 1883 by "Borax" Smith of Death Valley fame. He made a famous trademark of his wagon trains by naming the widely used household product "Twenty Mule Team Borax."

In its heyday, Calico had more than 100 producing mines and about as many stamp mills, also a narrow gauge railroad that connected the town with one of the larger mines. Disastrous fires swept the town several times. A fire in 1887 destroyed 135 buildings. When

the town was rebuilt, every third or fourth building was made of rock or adobe, as a means of preventing the spread of future fires.

The "fire department" was a volunteer bucket brigade, which wasn't very effective when relentless desert winds swept the tinder-dry buildings. But that dryness has preserved the ruins remarkably well. Even old signs are legible and the main timbers in many buildings are as sound as on the day they were laid. The old-fashioned square nails that hold them together have rusted hardly at all.

Vandals and looters have left their mark throughout the old town. But their desecrations are at an end. Calico Fred and his six-gun guarantee that.

In its time, Calico was known as a poor man's bonanza, because the pay veins were comparatively shallow, not deep workings like those at Virginia City, where huge fortunes were spent in development. The deepest shaft around Calico goes down only about 500 feet. But that is drop enough to bend and dent a rubberneck visitor pretty bad. So if you go to Calico now, you'll see screens and railings being put up around the gaping mine portals.

I've told you that Calico has been forgotten, but that's not strictly a fact. The desert town of Yermo, just a coyote-jackrabbit chase away, down on the busy highway, holds a Calico Day festival every May. Local citizens grow whiskers and dress up frontier style. This affair is different from most, because a flock of original inhabitants flock down out of the hills to take part. A surprising lot of early settlers still live in the locality. It seems that every ghost town with a vivid past has at least one clinging human relic.

Some of them get to be local celebrities, like "Seldom Seen Sam" of Ballarat, a lean, elusive recluse who has lived there "since when."

Ballarat is another ghost town, about 100 miles north of Calico, in the Panamints. Last time I met up with Sam, he was sort of sad on account of a paved highway just put through in downwind spitting distance of his diggings.

At that time I asked him for his definition of a "ghost town" and this is what he told me:

"Any played-out mining camp that has a population of more than three can't properly be called a ghost town. Heck, no! Upwards of that, they're crowded communities. Congested centers, that's what."

Seldom Seen Sam ought to know, if anyone does, so I reckon we can take his say-so for it.

Which of these 2 one time WEAKLINGS PAID only a Few Cents to become an All-Around HE-MAN at Home ?

Larry Campbell — Rex Ferrus

WHICH ONE PAID HUNDREDS OF DOLLARS TO TRAIN AT MY SIDE?

Rex Ferrus mailed a coupon and paid only a few cents. Larry Campbell paid me hundreds of dollars.

LET ME PROVE I CAN MAKE YOU TOO an "ALL-AROUND HE-MAN FAST — or it won't cost you a cent — says George F. Jowett— World's Greatest Body Builder

Just as I did Rex Ferrus, I'll teach you, at home, the "Progressive Power Method" through which I rebuilt myself from a wreck at 15, to holder of more strength records than any other living teacher!

BUILD A BODY YOU WILL BE PROUD OF . . .

Send only 10c for my 5 easy-to-follow, picture-packed courses now in 1 volume, "How to Become a Muscular He-Man."

10 DAY TRIAL! IF these 5 courses do not PRODUCE results in ONE WEEK, send them back and I'll return your dime.

GEORGE F. JOWETT "Champion of Champions"

FREE: Jowett's Photo Book of Famous Strong Men!

JOWETT INSTITUTE, Dept. TF-19
230 Fifth Avenue, New York 1, N. Y.

Dear George: Please mail to me prepaid FREE Jowett's Photo Book of Strong Men, plus all 5 Muscle Building Courses, "How to Become a Muscular He-Man." ENCLOSED FIND 10c in complete payment for EVERYTHING.

NAME ..... AGE .....
(Please Print Plainly, Include Zone Number)
ADDRESS ..... NO C.O.D.'s
CITY ..... ZONE & STATE .....

FAMOUS PHARMACIST'S FORMULA

Blistex

IMMEDIATE and highly effective RELIEF for COLD SORES FEVER BLISTERS and CHAPPED LIPS

Available at all leading drug and department stores. Only 35c

QUIT TOBACCO!

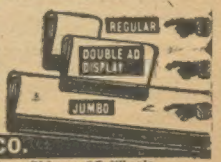
Remove all tobacco craving safe in every form and join the thousands who have completely obtained satisfactory freedom from tobacco with the old genuine TOBACCO BANISHER. Send for FREE BOOKLET describing the ill effects of tobacco, and a safe reliable home treatment. A proven success for 39 years.

GUSTAF H. GUSTAFSON CO.
2325 E. Vickery Blvd. Dept. TF. Ft. Worth 3, Texas

MAKE EXTRA MONEY

EVERY BUSINESS EVERYWHERE USES UNION LABEL BOOK MATCHES

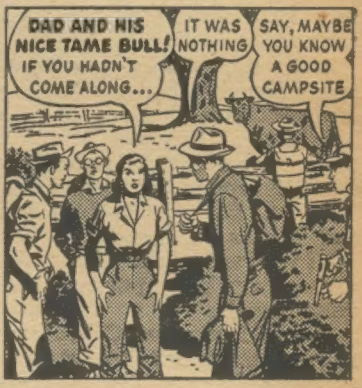
No experience needed to earn big daily commissions. Be a direct factory representative of the world's largest exclusive UNION LABEL Book Match manufacturer. Prospects everywhere. Feature Glamour Girls, Hillbillies, scenics and dozens of other styles—Double Books—Jumbo Books—nearly 100 color combinations. New, bigger portfolio makes this fastest selling line a real profit maker for you. Write TODAY for full details.



SUPERIOR MATCH CO.
Dept. R-953, 7528 S. Greenwood Ave., Chicago 19, Illinois
West Coast Salesmen, write Box 1087, San Jose, Calif.

IT WAS NIP AND TUCK FOR JACK UNTIL . . .

JACK ROSS AND HIS GROUP OF STATE FORESTRY STUDENTS ARE LOOKING FOR A CAMPSITE AT THE END OF A DAY-LONG HIKE WHEN . . .



UNLESS YOUR MEAL'S TOO FAR ALONG, WE'D LIKE YOU TO JOIN US FOR SUPPER
SOUNDS WONDERFUL! WE CAN CLEAN UP IN A FEW MINUTES
ONE HOUR LATER

SAY! I GO FOR THIS BLADE! NEVER ENJOYED A MORE REFRESHING SHAVE
THIN GILLETTES ARE MIGHTY POPULAR ON THE CAMPUS. THEY'RE REALLY KEEN AND LONG LASTING

ENJOY EASY, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES AND SAVE MONEY TOO. USE KEEN, LONG-LASTING THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE PRECISION MADE FOR YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR AND PROTECT YOU FROM THE DISCOMFORT AND IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ASK FOR THEM IN THE TEN-BLADE PACKAGE WITH USED-BLADE COMPARTMENT
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢
NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

Brush patches may add to the grandeur of the rugged terrain of the Southwest but they hide sizable groups of cattle and are proving a big problem in the fight against foot and mouth diseases.

Singapore, the land of exotic charm, got one of its biggest thrills recently—a "real cowboy" came to town. Dick Fancher of South Dakota landed on a round-the-world trip, wearing a Western hat, boots, checked shirt and so on. He owns a 20,000-acre ranch near Rapid City.

Douglas firs the height of a 20-story building are not uncommon in government forests of the West.

The day before filming of a new motion picture began 13 tents were erected on the location site to house the Indians in the film. The following morning it was discovered that one of the tents had been destroyed by fire. Anxiously Director Edward Ludwig asked the Navajo chief if anyone had been burned or otherwise hurt. "No one hurt," the chief calmly answered. "Thirteen tents. Much bad. We fixum. Now, everything okay."

A great grandson of Geronimo, the famous Apache chieftain of the 19th century, has been granted a horse trainer's license by the Hialeah track.

One of the first radio communication systems ever to be used in ranch operations is being installed in Canadian, Texas.

The Fioresta mine near Crested Butte, Col., is believed to be the highest coal mine in the United States.

The accidental breaking of a brown-colored whisky bottle, that had been used as a prop in the making of a Robert Ryan-starring cinema in Utah, delayed production for two hours. The nearest town was 20 miles away, and the sale of alcohol in Utah requires a state-issued license. An assistant director saved the day finally by borrowing a similarly-colored whisky bottle from the owner of a ranch three miles away.

Some of the American Indians practiced cannibalism, believing that if they ate the hearts of their enemies it would endow them with their foes' bravery.

The discovery of a 14-inch mummy in a cave near Casper, Wyo., has led to the belief that the Western plains may once have been inhabited by a prehistoric race of tiny men.

LOST RIVER LOOT

A JIM HATFIELD NOVEL BY JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Jailbreak

DUFF PROBUS was to mount the penitentiary gallows at dawn tomorrow, less than eight hours away. He had strangled a fellow lifer who had shared his cell in the Texas State Prison at Santa Casita for twelve of the nineteen years Probus had been an inmate.

Now, sitting on the cot of the death-house cell, Probus was impatient for the warden and the chaplain to get out. They could not know that Probus aimed to break jail tonight. The key to his getaway scheme was being transferred from the interior cellblocks to the death-house, the windows of which overlooked the Texas landscape beyond the walls. The only way to arrange that transfer of cells

Twenty years the hidden gold lay buried—and then both the fighting Ranger and an outlaw chief arrived to unearth it!

had been to murder his fellow-prisoner.

"Old Duff must of gone stir-crazy, to croak the best friend he had," was the verdict of the other prisoners, the day they saw Duff Probus being taken to the death-house in shackles. "He had it easy as a trusty."

The brown-cassocked priest finished his prayer for the soul of this condemned man. Duff Probus made no sign of thanking the padre. His mind was too busy plotting out the details of a plan that had been years in the making, plans which, if they worked out, would see him a free man again. Tonight!

Vaguely he heard the warden addressing him: "Sorry you wound up like this, Probus. You have been a model prisoner, a trusty. Only the enormity of the crimes which put you here at Santa Casita have prevented the Texas Prison Board from paroling you for good behavior . . ."

Then the prison official and the chaplain were gone. When the steel door at the end of the short hallway clanged shut and the permanent guard on duty there had locked it, Duff Probus got to his feet and reached for the stub of tallow candle which had been left him.

He was a powerfully built man of forty-two. Working on the rockpile for so many years had kept him whittled down to a hard physical fitness, as he had been when, as a cowpuncher gone wrong, he had heard a Judge over in Presidio County sentence him to life imprisonment.

THE years had put a network of hard lines on Probus' face, accentuating the predatory cast of his mouth, the brooding evil of his gunmetal-colored eyes. His head was shaved at intervals, giving him a grotesque appearance which a few months on the outside would alter. He presumed his once-black hair would be streaked with gray when it was allowed to grow out again.

The candle clutched in a calloused hand, Duff Probus climbed up on the cot and gripped the bars of the foot-square window built high in the forty-foot granite wall of the penitentiary.

The night sky was ablaze with stars. The rank odors of sagebrush and river-bottom willows wafted to his nostrils, enflaming him with a maddening desire for freedom.

He waved the candle three times in a figure-eight motion, then snuffed it out. Fixing his eyes on the cottonwood bosques down on a bend of the Rio Torcido, which flowed through the outskirts of Santa Casita, Duff Probus waited.

A thin line of moisture broke out on his upper lip. The arrangements he had made with Del Keefer and Marfa Bilidoux in the visitors' room of the prison more than three months ago called for a five-minute wait before they answered his signal.

Demons of doubt tormented the hardened outlaw as the minutes ticked away. What if his two partners had decided to back out on the deal at the last minute? Supposing they had not learned of his murdering the convict who shared his cell? But surely the newspapers throughout the border country would carry that news.

No, Keefer and Bilidoux would not fail him. For Probus had vowed to share the hidden loot of the now-famous Encinal Roundup Robbery with them if they made his jailbreak possible. No one, including Probus himself, knew exactly how much dinero the cattle buyers at the Encinal beef gather had given up, but it was in the neighborhood of two hundred thousand dollars.

Waiting for an answering signal from the riverbank out there, Duff Probus relived in memory the stirring events of that long-ago day when he and six other cowpunchers had joined forces to hold up the Encinal stockbuyers.

It was an annual event, the massing of

cattle on the Encinal bottoms, with every ranch in a two-hundred mile radius sending crews to cut out cattle bearing their own brands. Buyers from the big packeries in Omaha and K.C. and Chicago attended these great roundups, to bid for beef before it was trail-driven to railheads outside the Lone Star State.

Probus had attended the big beef gather in the Encinal *brasada* with the intention of robbing the beef buyers, knowing the huge sums of cash they carried to

JIM HATFIELD

these roundups. His brand was not represented this far east; Probus ran a small-tally outfit over in the Big Bend, with a winery and vineyard as a sideline.

Probus had arrived at the Encinal Roundup sided by five outlaw henchmen he had picked up en route. At midnight before the big auction, Probus and his men had slipped into the cattle buyers' tent and, in cold blood, had knifed eight sleeping men.

They had escaped without rousing the camp, Probus carrying their haul of gold specie and currency in his alforja bags. By daylight, when the massacre was discovered, the six killers were well on their way beyond the Pecos. It was their intention to cross the Rio Grande and hole up in Mexico.

They entered the Big Bend malpais a full day ahead of the angry cattlemen pursuing them from the Encinal *brasada*. But nemesis was waiting for them in Probus' home county. A cowtown sheriff named Fenn Ferris, notified of the outlaws' line of flight by telegraph, was waiting for them at the Lost River gorge with a posse. In the shoot-out which followed, three of Probus' men were shot from their saddles. Del Keefer and Marfa Bilidoux—their names had been different then—alone made good their escape.

PROBUS himself eluded Sheriff Ferris' manhunt for six days. During that time he cached the treasure-laden saddlebags somewhere in the vicinity of his Lost River ranch. But Ferris had captured him after a hot gun battle when Probus tried to cross the Rio.

At his trial, Probus had pleaded not guilty to murder. But, because a thousand dollars of loot was found on him, a Presidio judge had sentenced him to spend the rest of his life behind bars at Santa Casita. All this had transpired nearly twenty years ago.

Five years back, Probus had smuggled a letter to Del Keefer out of the prison, bribing a Mexican laundress to mail it for him. Keefer, using another name, had responded to his call. And, by dangling the Encinal Roundup loot in front of Keefer for bait, Probus had enlisted his old partner's aid in making a break. . . .

Probus' reverie was interrupted now by a sudden flash of light over amid the riverbank cotton woods. The flare of a match, extinguished almost at once. Three times the signal was repeated. Then darkness closed in over the Texas scene.

"They didn't fail me," Probus muttered,

and a tremor swept through him as he unlaced his prison shoes and stripped off his coarse woolen socks. "My Lost River loot will buy my freedom yet."

With feverish haste, Probus started unraveling the yarn of the socks. It took him the better part of an hour to reduce the socks into a tight ball of woolen string.

Using one of his shoes as a weight, Probus tied the unraveled string through an eyelet and carefully lowered the brogan through the narrow bars of the death house window. Inch by inch, foot by foot he let the ball of yarn pay out, as the weighted end approached the ground.

Probus was glad this was a moonless night. No sharp-eyed guard patrolling the penitentiary walls out there would see the dark-colored wisp of yarn against the weathered stone walls.

He felt the shoe come to rest on the hard-packed adobe at the base of the penitentiary wall, and tied off the string to one of the thick steel bars of the window.

Fifteen minutes later the death house guard, Steve Sanders, unlocked the door and came in with a lantern. This was to make sure that the condemned man did not attempt suicide on the eve of his hanging. Sanders saw the outlaw stretched out on his cot, snoring peacefully. The guard checked the cell lock, then returned to his station outside the hall which led to the gallows chamber.

With infinite stealth, Probus rolled himself off the cot so as to give out no tell-tale creak of rawhide springs. Reaching up to the window ledge, he gave the yarn string a preliminary tug. It was now heavily weighted at the bottom end.

Knowing he had a full hour's time before Sanders put in another routine appearance, Probus started hauling in the woolen line. He worked slowly, patiently, so that the object which his two partners had tied on the bottom of the string along with his shoe would not make a noise against the granite blocks of the penitentiary parapet.

Probus was limp with suspense and nervousness by the time he had reeled in all the yarn string. He reached through the bars now, and his fingertips tingled as they slid over the outlines of a Colt six-shooter protruding from the prison shoe.

Slowly, cautiously, making sure that the backstrap of the gun did not strike the metal bars, Probus pulled in the gun, and the shoe with it. His thumb twirled the cylinder, checked the loads. All six chambers contained a cartridge.

He hefted the gun, realizing how long it had been since his hand had known the feel of a weapon. Then he thrust the Colt muzzle under the waistband of his prison dungarees, and proceeded to put on his shoes.

Precisely on schedule, Steve Sanders unlocked the outer hallway door and made his way to the death cell, his jail lantern slung over his elbow, its screened slit of light glinting off the ring of jail keys hanging from his belt.

This time he found the condemned man standing up, facing him. Sanders said sympathetically, "Can't sleep, eh? I don't blame—"

SANDERS broke off with a gasp as he felt the cold muzzle of a six-gun suddenly punch him in the ribs over the heart. Duff Probus had produced the weapon as if by magic. Sanders knew that this lifer had been repeatedly searched during the three days he had been confined to the deathouse cell.

Through the bars which separated them, the convict's snarled whisper hit Sanders' ear-drums as lethal as a snake's hiss:

"Don't make a sound. Unlock this cell. This gun is no wooden dummy. Don't force me to kill you."

Sanders hesitated, his eyes wild with alarm.

"Don't forget the wife and kids at home," Probus snapped. "If I pull this trigger I'll rouse the whole place. But that wouldn't do you any good, Steve. You'd be dead."

Sanders knew his duty, but his instinct of self-preservation was uppermost in his mind now. There were dozens of other guards along the route this outlaw must

take to reach safety.

Trembling visibly, Sanders unlocked the cell, keeping his arms lifted away from the gun at his belt as Probus stepped outside.

"You can't get away with this," Sanders whispered. "You—"

The guard slumped as Probus clubbed him savagely with the muzzle of his Colt. Almost before he had struck the floor of the corridor, Probus was stripping off the guard's brass-buttoned coat, unbuckling his gun harness.

Five minutes later Probus was on his way downstairs from the deathhouse floor, clad now in the distinctive uniform of a prison guard. He was challenged at the locked door on the ground floor, but the guard there assumed this was Sanders and by the time he lifted his lantern for a look at the man's face, it was too late. The pocket knife Probus had taken from Sanders' pocket sank to the haft in the guard's throat and he died without uttering a betraying sound.

Reaching the open compound of the exercise yard, Probus kept to the shadows along the cellblock wall, threading his way through the maze of penitentiary buildings with a familiarity engendered from long years of working here as a trusty janitor.

Rifle-armed guards, pacing their monotonous rounds on the turreted ramparts of the upper walls, probably saw Probus as he passed the administration building. But the prison garb roused no suspicions on their part. Probus had planned this expertly.

Reaching the main gates, which Probus knew were locked and the key in the warden's possession at night-time, Probus entered the guardhouse cubicle. The head night-gateman was snoozing. He never felt the smashing blow of a gun barrel which dropped him off his stool.

With the gateman's key, Probus unlocked the guardhouse door and stepped out into the night—free of the penitentiary's confining walls for the first time in nearly two decades.

No challenge rang out from the wall guards as he headed down San Jacinto street. The guards assumed this man was one of their fellows who, having ended his shift of duty, was on his way home. Probus knew the prison routines; he had planned his timing with extreme care.

Five minutes later Duff Probus was at the riverbank cottonwoods, shaking hands with his accomplices. Both Del Keefer and Marfa Bilidoux were more nervous than he.

"We've got horses waiting," Keefer whispered. "We'll high-tail it to San Antone and hop aboard a cattle car loaded with Hereford bulls that I'm takin' back to the Twin F ranch."

Probus grinned as they forded the Rio Tordido and headed southwestward toward San Antonio. Del Keefer had been working for old Fenn Ferris' Twin F Connected ranch over in Perdido County for the past six-seven years. And Ferris was the sheriff who had arrested Probus over nineteen years ago.

Keefer was saying, "That shot you put in Ferris' kneecap crippled him for life, Duff. He give up his star and started this ranch up in the Lost River country, right across the gorge from your old spread. Maybe that gold you buried in the old days will be on Ferris' own ranch."

Probus grinned mysteriously. He was not yet ready to share the secret of where he had stashed that loot.

"I'll pay you boys off," he promised, "as soon as I've taken care of Fenn Ferris. I aim to bushwhack that tinstar before I leave Texas for good."

CHAPTER II

Lone Wolf Ranger

WITHIN seven hours of Duff Probus' sensational jailbreak at Santa Casita —the first in that institution's grim history—official news of his escape lay on the desk of Captain "Roaring Bill" McDowell of the Texas Ranger district headquarters

in Austin.

After a short study of Probus' case history in the Ranger files, McDowell bellowed for his secretary.

"Dispatch a telegram to the Ranger barracks at Dos Gatos," McDowell instructed his assistant. "Jim Hatfield is over there trainin' recruits this month. Tell him I said drop everything and report to me at once. I've got an assignment for him to handle."

Within an hour, a messenger arrived at the rifle range of the Dos Gatos training camp for Texas Rangers and delivered a telegram to the tall, strikingly handsome young Ranger in charge of training a squad of recruits in the fine art of marksmanship.

"Got to leave you, boys," Hatfield said. "My superior wants me to report for field duty in Austin *pronto prontito*. So I guess your training will be turned over to a better man, boys."

The rookies laughed. They well knew that Hatfield, better known as the Lone Wolf Ranger, was the star performer in McDowell's roster of lawmen. Barracks gossip had it that Hatfield could have had a captain's commission years ago, but had preferred to pursue his career lone-handed, matching his wits and guns against the toughest law-breakers the Lone Star country had to offer.

His "Lone Wolf" nickname was no idle one. Hatfield rarely exercised his prerogative of taking a Ranger company along with him on a tough case. He preferred to work alone, assisted only by Goldy, his magnificent sorrel stallion.

As a result, Jim Hatfield's name had become a legend throughout Texas. Evildoers were known to admit that they would prefer to buck an entire Ranger posse than to find the Lone Wolf Ranger pitted against them.

At the present time, heavy losses in Ranger personnel had forced the state to recruit new men. McDowell had reluctantly permitted his ace ranger, Jim Hatfield, to report to the Dos Gatos barracks for duty in training new men for their arduous duties. Headquarters believed, with good reason, that Hatfield's presence at the recruiting barracks would stimulate volunteers.

Now, in the presence of his rookie squad, Hatfield pretended disappointment at leaving the Dos Gatos barracks. Secretly, these weeks of routine training duty had palled on him. He yearned for action, and this telegram from Roaring Bill hinted that something big was in the offing, a case which McDowell wanted to assign to him and no other.

Apart from his reputation as a law-enforcement officer, ranging free-lance from the Gulf to the Panhandle and from the civilization of East Texas to the primitive frontier beyond the Pecos to El Paso, Jim Hatfield looked the part he played.

Standing better than six feet in height without the added loft of his gray Stetson and spike-heeled cowboots, Hatfield's rugged face was the color of oiled bronze from his lifetime in the saddle. His greenish eyes seemed attuned to limitless expanses of rangeland; his hair was the coal black of a *zopilote's* wing and his big, rope-calloused hands were pure magic with the pair of big-butted Colt .45s holstered at his flanks.

His silver-ringed five-pointed Texas Ranger star was seldom seen in public; he carried it in a secret compartment of his belt. In appearance, he was a rugged cowman, wearing a cowman's bullhide chaps and bibless levis, hickory shirt and bandanna neckpiece.

Anyone meeting him for the first time might mistake his easy-going humor as a sign of weakness. But those who had seen him in action with flaming six-guns or Winchester knew different. Hatfield was as coldly savage and grim of purpose when in pursuit of a law-breaker as the range lobo whose nickname he bore.

WITHIN twenty minutes of receiving his superior's urgent summons to report at Austin headquarters, Hatfield was putting Goldy in a stock car at the Dos Gatos railroad station. McDowell had called for speed, and since Dos Gatos was linked with the Texas capital city by rail,

Holding his wounded arm, the outlaw clapped spurs to his horse and fled

he chose the train instead of making the journey by his favorite method, horseback.

Darkness enshrouded Austin when Hatfield alighted from the Texas & Southern passenger train in the state capital. He saddled up Goldy and headed along Congress Street at once, knowing he would find his crotchety old boss at headquarters. When a big case was brewing, McDowell often worked around the clock. A demanding superior, he worked himself as hard as he worked any of the rangers on his list.

Nor was Hatfield mistaken. A light glowed behind the shuttered windows of the Texas Rangers office. Tying Goldy to a hitchrack in the rear of the building, the Lone Wolf Ranger headed upstairs and was soon shaking hands with his hot-tempered superior.

"Tired of barracks life, Jim, or are you getting soft?" McDowell thundered, when they were in the privacy of his office. It was an axiom around Ranger headquarters that Roaring Bill could not ask a man to pass the salt without yelling his head off.

Hatfield grinned. "I hope," he said, "you've got something a little more exciting than training recruits for a change."

McDowell snorted. Underlying his gruff treatment of his star Ranger was a deep-abiding affection for this husky young giant whom duty forced him to send into suicidal situations so many times.

"Jim," McDowell said, lowering his voice a tone or so below a cyclone's howl, "have you ever heard of the famous Encinal Roundup Robbery?"

The young Ranger nodded. "Happened when I was a kid," he said. "Twenty-odd years ago, wasn't it? A bunch of hard cases butchered a gathering of cattle buy-

ers and vamosed with half the dinero in Texas."

McDowell nodded.

"It happened nineteen years, ten months and three days ago," the Captain said. "A sheriff over in Perdido County headed off the desperados, cashed in three of them. Two escaped, John Cunkelman and Baptiste LaTruex by name. The ringleader, a Nueces brush-popper named Dufford Probus, was arrested while attempting to ford the Rio Grande."

Hatfield settled back in his chair, wondering why McDowell was giving him the history of a case which had occurred when he was a tousle-headed kid in school.

"The loot," McDowell went on, "was in gold and greenbacks. It amounted roughly to two hundred thousand bucks. Except for what money Probus had in his jeans when he was captured by Sheriff Fenn Ferris, of Riobend, twenty years ago, that loot has never been seen since."

Hatfield shrugged. "Probably been spent long ago," he said.

Roaring Bill McDowell shook his head. "Not so," he said. "Better than a hundred thousand of that money was in currency. The packing houses in Omaha and Chicago and Kansas City had a check on the serial numbers of that paper money. Not one nickel of it has ever showed up at the Treasury in Washington. No, the loot is still cached somewhere."

Hatfield yawned. He had been up since dawn, and the train trip down from Dos Gatos had been a tiring one. He wished Roaring Bill would get down to brass tacks.

The gruff old Ranger Captain went to his files and took out a dossier labeled ENCINAL ROUNDUP ROBBERY.

"This ringleader, Duff Probus," McDowell went on, "was sent up for life at Santa Casita penitentiary. Not once has he given any hint of where that Encinal Roundup loot may be hidden. Yet, according to the testimony of one of the outlaws shot by Ferris' posse, Probus had the entire loot in his saddle-bags at the time of that show-down in the Big Bend."

Hatfield said patiently, "Get down to cases, boss. Do you want me to start fine-tooth-combing the Big Bend for this loot?"

MC DOWELL ignored the Lone Wolf as he sorted through a dossier of papers on his desk and handed Hatfield the prison photographs, profile and full face, of Convict #SC2910316, real name Dufford L. Probus.

"We're not too concerned about recovering that Encinal loot—only the insurance companies are interested in that angle," the Ranger official said. "Where the Rangers come into the picture is this—Duff Probus broke out of jail last night, with outside help."

Hatfield listened with intense interest as McDowell explained the circumstances of Probus' daringly ingenious jailbreak.

"What worries us," McDowell concluded, "is that Probus is now known to have headed a huge smuggling ring, with headquarters on his ranch in Perdido County. With Probus on the loose, he may reorganize his old border-hopping gang which was the scourge of the Border Patrol and the Emigration Service and U. S. Customs twenty years ago."

Hatfield said musingly, "These two outsiders who smuggled the six-gun up to Probus' cell—you figure they were members of the old smuggling outfit?"

"The only members of that gang who were never apprehended," McDowell explained, "were Cunkelman and LaTruex, whom we know definitely were with Probus on the Encinal Roundup job."

"In that case," Hatfield said, "maybe their motive in springing Probus from the pen after all these years was so Probus could lead them to the hidden loot from that Encinal robbery."

McDowell grinned appreciatively.

"Exactly," he applauded the Lone Wolf Ranger. "Those stupid officials at Santa Casita admit that Probus had outside visitors a few months ago, presumably cowhands who once worked on his ranch, but they didn't trace where they went. And Cunkelman and LaTruex, of course, have had twenty years to change their names

and alter their appearances in."

Hatfield passed Probus' prison photograph back to McDowell.

"The way I see it, you figure Probus will head back to Perdido County to pick up his loot and split it with the compadres who smuggled that gun into his death cell," the Ranger observed. "In that case, you'll be sending me over that way in the hopes I can pick up Probus. How recent is this photograph?"

McDowell growled, "Taken last year, so that's how he looks now—without hair or beard. At least we can thank the warden at Santa Casita for keeping their pictures up-to-date."

Hatfield got to his feet, yawning again. "When do I leave for the Big Bend?"

McDowell settled back in his chair. "I've got tickets for you and your Goldy hoss on the westbound Border Limited which leaves Austin for El Paso and California one hour from now," he said. "Had to pull my authority to get 'em to put a stock car on a crack passenger flyer like that for Goldy's benefit. You'll get off the train at Paisano and follow Lost River into Perdido County."

Hatfield grinned. "You work pretty fast, boss."

"Got to, if you're to reach that country ahead of Probus," McDowell blustered. "He may hide out for weeks or months, letting his hair grow. While you're killing time in Riobend, the nearest settlement to the area where Probus had to cache his loot, I want you to identify yourself to the ex-sheriff who sent Probus up—Fenn Ferris. He is now running a cattle ranch, the Twin F Connected. Ferris can give you the details of his fight with Probus' gang, maybe give you some slight idea as to where Probus might have gone before Ferris arrested him at the Rio Grande. Somewhere along that route, a fifth of a million dollars is hidden. It'll be like hunting for a needle in a haystack, but it's all we got to go on. And you're the only man in the Rangers organization who can nail Probus, in my estimation."

McDowell returned the Probus dossier to his files, blew out the office lamp and put on his cap.

"I wish I wasn't so old and stove-up," he said as they left the office building on their way to the railroad station. "I'd give a heap to dab my loop on Probus. He's a dangerous criminal, Jim. And we know he's backed by at least two sidewinders. Corraling him will be a tough job. So when you reach Riobend, you'd better keep your identity under cover—except to Fenn Ferris."

Two hours later, stretched out on a Pullman berth, the Lone Wolf Ranger was almost regretful for the reputation he had built up for himself in Roaring Bill McDowell's eyes. Locating an escaped convict as cagey as Duff Probus, finding a fabulous cow-country loot which men had searched for over a lapse of two decades without success, was asking the impossible.

And yet McDowell was expecting him to deliver the impossible. Such was the penalty of fame. Realizing that time for leisure might never be his again, Jim Hatfield relaxed, and went to sleep with the clickety-click of the coach wheels over rail joints for his lullaby.

CHAPTER III

Hot Lead Revenge

FENN FERRIS, gray-headed boss of the Twin F Connected spread, was thankful that he had ridden out to the Star Route mail box this morning, instead of his daughter. Destiny was waiting in that box.

Ever since his eyesight began to fail him, Alva had opened old Ferris' mail as a matter of course. And she would have asked plenty of questions about the meaning of this telegram from the warden of the state prison.

One knee hooked over the pommel of his Brazos saddle, the grizzled old ex-sheriff scanned the yellow Overland Tele-

graph flimsy, mailed out from Riobend yesterday. The words went blurry as old Ferris focussed his failing eyes on the message:

FENIMORE FERRIS
TWIN F CONNECTED RANCH
VIA RIOBEND, TEXAS

REGRET TO ADVISE YOU THAT DUFF PROBUS ESCAPED FROM STATE PRISON THURSDAY NIGHT ON EVE OF EXECUTION FOR MURDER OF FELLOW INMATE.

TWO ACCOMPLICES ASSISTED PROBUS FROM THE OUTSIDE. NO FURTHER CLUES AVAILABLE.

WE WARN YOU TO EXPECT REPRISAL. PROBUS ON MANY OCCASIONS IN PAST EXPRESSED HIS HOPE TO ONE DAY GET REVENGE ON THE SHERIFF WHO ARRESTED HIM. ADVISE UTMOST VIGILANCE UNTIL FUGITIVE HAS BEEN RECAPTURED.

HADLEY M. MARTIN
WARDEN, STATE PRISON,
SANTA CASITA, TEXAS

Ferris took a match from the snakeskin band of his Stetson and set fire to the telegram and its envelope. When it was completely destroyed, he stuffed the rest of his mail in a saddle pouch and wheeled his deep-chested steeldust gelding back in the direction of his ranch home, overlooking the deep canyon of the Rio Perdido, Lost River.

Ferris was in his middle sixties now. He wore a flowing mustache and goatee which gave him a distinguished appearance. Outwardly he appeared to be a prime physical specimen, with his ramrod spine and powerfully muscled body. But his left leg was stiff at the knee joint, the result of a bullet wound inflicted on him by Duff Probus on that long-ago day when, as sheriff of one of the wildest and most remote Texas counties on the Rio Grande border, he had trapped the fugitive outlaw attempting to swim the river to Mexico.

As a result of that wound, Fenn Ferris' left leg now reposed in a special stirrup. The injury had forced him to turn in his star at the heyday of his lawman's career.

He had moved out here on the mesa above Lost River and founded the Twin F Connected outfit. The same year that had seen Duff Probus enter Santa Casita prison for life, Ferris had married. His wife had died a year later, bringing their little girl into the world. Alva was eighteen now, engaged to marry the marshal of Riobend, Ted Ralls, in early autumn.

It was Alva's happiness that was uppermost in Ferris' mind as he cantered back toward the Twin F Connected. He had no doubt but that Duff Probus would return to Perdido County, to dig up the loot of the celebrated Encinal Round-up robbery, if for no other reason.

"He'll be gunning for me, sure as Tophet," Fenn Ferris spoke bitterly to himself. "From ambush, most likely. But he'll get me. I might as well resign myself to that. . ."

The old man racked his brains for some plausible excuse to get Alva away from the ranch this morning. Probus had had time to get here from Santa Casita. Knowing Probus' brutal make-up, Ferris had a subconscious dread that the escaped convict might try to harm his daughter as one means of hurting him.

He must get Alva over to Riobend at whatever cost, where Ted Ralls could watch after her. Nothing must interrupt her happiness. Ralls, a cowpuncher before he had accepted the town marshal's job at the county seat, intended to build a home for Alva out on the Twin F Connected this coming winter, so that after old Fenn had drifted over the Big Divide, he could take over the management of the ranch. Ralls was cut out to be a range rider, not a lawman.

"If Probus works like I figure he will, Ralls may find himself heir to my spread sooner than he thinks," ran the morbid thought through the old rancher's head. "Glad I'm always wearin' a gun. I might be lucky enough to take Probus with me whenever the showdown comes."

RIDING down the poplar-bordered lane toward his picturesque adobe-and-tile California ranchhouse, old Fenn Ferris caught sight of his daughter out

tending the flowerbeds in front of the place.

She waved a gay greeting to the old man who had been both father and mother to her during the years he had been building up his iron. At eighteen, Alva was the image of her mother. She had the same wealth of wheat-blonde hair, the same clear blue eyes and flawless complexion, evenly browned by layers of suntan.

At the moment she was wearing a rodeo blouse with crescent shaped pockets which accentuated the full ripe curves of her blooming womanhood, a pair of Fenn's old levis, and spurred cowboots. Alva spent most of her time outside the house riding her father's range. She would make an ideal wife for young Ralls.

"Alva honey," the oldster called from the front gate, "I just got word that Del Keefer's back from San Antone with that load of blooded Hereford bulls. How about ridin' over to town with me and lookin' 'em over?"

The girl dropped her hoe and watering pail and stripped off her cotton work gloves.

"You think I'd turn down a chance to see whether Ted is flirting with those honkytonk belles, Dad?" she answered merrily.

The girl did not see her father's gaunt cheeks swell with his pent-up exhalation of relief. His pretext was plausible enough, at that. One of his riders, Del Keefer, had dropped a note in the mail from Del Rio to the effect that he would be arriving in Riobend today with the breeding stock Ferris had ordered recently. The stock train would arrive in town around noon. It was logical that Ferris would want to help Keefer haze the bulls back to the ranch.

By the time Alva had changed to her town clothes, her father had saddled up the strawberry roan she had raised from a foal and was waiting out under the poplars.

He was thinking, "Got to tell Ted Ralls the reason why I want Alva away from the ranch. That ain't going to be easy, Alva being as spunky as she is. But it won't be safe around here as long as Probus is on the prowl."

In a few moments he and his daughter were cantering out to the river road, heading southeast toward Riobend on the Rio Grande. At their right was the six-hundred foot gorge of Lost River, so named because it vanished underground a couple of miles below the ranch, presumably emptying its flood into the Rio Grande. No man had ever found the other end of Lost River's subterranean course.

The wagon road which Ferris had built out from Riobend followed the bed of a dry arroyo after leaving the rim of Lost River. Here the foliage was heavy, requiring annual pruning to keep the road open—cottonwoods and tupelo thickets, flowering cactus and mesquite, smoketrees and manzanita and Spanish agarita. At this season of the year the trees were abloom with color.

"Isn't it great to be alive, Dad?" Alva exclaimed, inhaling deeply of the scented air. "How lucky to be a Texan in the spring."

Ferris nodded, trying to be his usual

[Turn page]

RELIEVES • HEADACHE
• NEURALGIA
• NEURITIS PAIN FAST

Here's Why...
Anacin® is like a doctor's prescription. That is, Anacin contains not one but a combination of medically proved active ingredients. Anacin is specially compounded to give FAST, LONG LASTING relief. Don't wait. Buy Anacin today.

cheerful self. It was difficult, knowing that from here on out he would continually be under the shadow of bushwhack death.

"Alva darling," the old man said, "why don't you and Ted get married right away? You could live at his place in town until he gets your place built out on the ranch."

Alva fiddled with the chin-strap of her cream-white Stetson, glancing sideways at her sire.

"What's the hurry, Dad? Getting tired of supporting me?"

Ferris grinned bleakly under his ram's-horn mustache.

"I'll be plumb lonesome after you leave, sweetheart. But why wait? Snatch happiness while you can. Life is an uncertain thing. Ted ain't got the safest job in the world, packin' the star in a tough burg like Riobend."

HE BROKE OFF, not having intended to talk in such a macabre strain. Ralls was plenty able to take care of himself as long as he wore the star.

"You know Ted wants to wait until his term is up next September," Alva said. "Besides, I'm only eighteen. Folks are telling Ted he's robbing the cradle as it is."

Ferris' eyes misted over as he said, "Your mother was only seventeen when I married her. She was your age when you were born."

At this moment they were rounding an elbow bend of the arroyo, hemmed in by forty-foot cutbanks. Ahead of them was a long vista of twisting wagon tracks, with the sunlight winking on the window panes of the town, eight miles away. Beyond Riobend was the blue gulf of the Rio Grande's canyon, and the sun-parched malpais of Chihuahua beyond, purple under the heat-waves.

"Dad," Alva spoke suddenly, "is anything wrong? Are you worried about anything?"

Before Ferris could think up an answer to that one, he caught sight of a lone horseman spurring out on the road directly ahead of them, from the concealment of a shaggy growth of flowering agaritas.

Ferris recognized the horse. It was an old apaloosa which the Mexitex Stables rented out in town. But there was something vaguely sinister about the way the rider wheeled his mount across the road broadside to them, blocking the way.

The old man unconsciously dropped a hand to the worn cedar stock of the single-action revolver he wore. He was trying to place this man with the brindle stubble covering his jaw, the close-set, reptilian eyes, the slouched shoulders.

Ferris and his daughter reined up when it became apparent that the rider did not intend to move his horse. The man's face was shadowed by the sweeping brim of a Stetson which was obviously brand new. He sat hipped at an angle in the saddle, his right hand resting on the cantle rim, inches from the black rubber stock of a .45 Colt which rode an oak-tanned holster, thonged down at his thigh.

"Howdy, Sheriff. I was on my way out to pay you a visit."

The rider's drawling voice struck a remembered note in Ferris. He hadn't been called sheriff for twenty years.

"Duff Probus!"

Alva shot a puzzled glance at her father, awed by the sharp tone of his voice as he spat out the name. She saw her grizzled sire's veiny hand poised above his gun butt, saw the tautness with which he sat his saddle.

Her glance went back to the rider. He was grinning now, exposing tobacco-stained snags of teeth. There was an unhealthy pallor on this man's face. He reminded her of an old range-wise lobo with one paw caught in a trap.

"You got a good memory, Sheriff," sneered the rider. "I got a good memory, too. There ain't been a night in the past nineteen-odd years I ain't dreamed about you, Fenn Ferris. You've aged a lot. Meb-be worryin' about me showin' up one day?"

Not taking his eyes off the escaped convict's face, the old man said in a hoarse voice to his daughter, "Alva, ride back to the ranch. I got business with this man."

Duff Probus shifted his malevolent glance to the girl, his eyes sweeping

lasciviously over the lovely lines of her.

"Reckon you'll be the sheriff's daughter," Probus chuckled, his voice putting a ripple of apprehension down her spine. "Too bad you'll be an orphan before long."

For the first time, Alva Ferris realized that real danger existed here. Despite the heat of this day, she felt a shiver go through her being. This stranger was trying to bait her father into a gun duel. And her father hadn't drawn a gun in anger since before she was born.

"Why should I go back, Dad?" the girl protested. "Who is this—this creature?"

Ferris said in a sick monotone, "He's a man I sent up for life, Alva. The man who made a cripple out of me. He's come back for revenge. I don't want you to be around when we get down to cases."

ALVA'S face bleached. She gripped her reins with the wild idea of putting her roan between these men, to stall off the inevitable shoot-out that was building up here. She knew her father's draw would be slowed by the arthritis in his hands. She could not stand idly by and see this man murder Fenn in cold blood.

As if reading her wild impulse, Duff Probus said sharply, "I wouldn't ma'am. Maybe you better leave. What I aim to do here won't be a nice sight."

Sucking a gasp across his teeth, Fenn Ferris seized his gun and made his blind stab at a draw while Probus' attention was diverted to his daughter.

His hand moved with a clumsy jerkiness. Before his old revolver was half out of leather, Duff Probus' talonlike fist swept away from his saddle cantle and whipped his shiny new gun out of scabbard.

Alva Ferris saw the nozzling spurt of flame spit from the bore of Probus' gun. Her father's head jerked back to the impact of a point-blank slug tunneling his forehead.

Paralyzed with horor, the girl saw old Ferris topple slowly from saddle to strike the hoof-churned road with a heavy thud. His horse, spooked by the raw gunsmoke biting its nostrils, wheeled and stampeded down the arroyo.

Probus's flaming gaze rested on the ex-sheriff's corpse for an instant, then swept around to fix on Alva.

"You know who I am," he ground out. "You seen what I did. Ain't no other way out of it, ma'am. I got to kill you."

With cold deliberation, the escaped convict raised his gun arm and notched the Colt sights on Alva's chest.

CHAPTER IV

"I'm One Minute Late"

EVEN as Duff Probus' trigger finger whitened at the knuckle, the deathly quiet of the arroyo road was blasted by the thunderous roar of another gun.

Alva felt the air-whip of a bullet passing her cheek, coming from an upward angle and from the rear.

Simultaneously she saw Duff Probus drop his cocked six-gun and clap his left hand to a blood-spurting bullet gash high on his right forearm.

Alva's strawberry roan wheeled and started bucking, out of control from the violent events of the past moment. Snatching her saddle horn to keep from being thrown, the girl had a fleeting glimpse of a rangy-built rider spurring a magnificent golden sorrel through the brush of the west rim of the arroyo.

The rider had a smoking-gun in his fist. At the moment he appeared about to urge his sorrel over the cutbank.

Duff Probus saw the big rider at the same instant. With a bawl of terror the outlaw wheeled his apaloosa and dug in the spurs, sending the livery mount crashing off into the roadside brush at a gallop.

The rider on the rimrock saw the whipping agarita foliage jerk off the killer's new Stetson, to expose a shaven head which gleamed like a skull in the sunrays.

Lifting his gun, the rider out of nowhere laid two fast shots at the fleeing gunman, and in the next instant his sorrel went over the brink of the cutbank as the brittle

shale gave way under its hoofs.

Alva saw none of this. Her roan, sunfishing like a rodeo bronc, loosened her grip and she felt herself being hurtled from the stirrups. Then a sharp pain lanced through her right ankle and even as her shoulder struck the ground, she knew her cowboot had become wedged in the tapaderoed stirrup.

The rider who had been shooting at Duff Probus emerged from a dense cloud of dust at the foot of the sloping cutbank, in time to see the roan bolting off up the road, dragging Alva Ferris' helpless body along the ruts.

The big rider on the golden sorrel cast one glance in the direction of Duff Probus' getaway, in time to see the outlaw spurring his horse into a side gulch and out of sight.

Then, making his instant decision, the rider holstered his gun and put the sorrel into a reaching full-tilt run, to Alva's aid. The roan, its speed impeded by the dragging body of the girl, was no match for the swift-footed sorrel. Quickly overhauling the runaway pony, the rider closed in at a quartering angle and hurled himself from saddle, bulldogging the roan as a rodeo performer might throw a steer.

So daringly executed was the rider's maneuver that Alva's horse was downed instantly. Before it could regain its feet the stranger had reached around to extricate the girl's trapped foot from the oxbow stirrup.

Alva lay moaning in the dirt as the rider got to his feet, one hand holding a secure grip on the roan's bit ring. Putting his weight on the roan's head, the rider swiftly hobbled one foreleg with the bridle reins, making it impossible for the horse to continue its flight.

A few yards down the road, the stranger's golden sorrel had halted and was trotting back toward his master.

Alva Ferris regained her senses to find her head cradled in the stranger's lap, the lip of a canteen against her mouth. She drank the water eagerly, and a semblance of rationality came back into her dazed eyes.

"Your leg isn't broken," the stranger's deeply masculine voice assured her. "This is your lucky day, miss. You could have had your skull smashed open by one of those hoofs."

WITH the rider's help, the girl came to her feet. The near brush with death had left her utterly stunned, her brain incapable, for the moment, of recalling the tragedy that had befallen her father not two minutes ago.

"If you're feeling up to it, I'll hike up to the rim yonder and see if there's any chance of overtaking that hombre who was about to shoot you, ma'am," the stranger said, helping her to the shade of a mesquite by the roadside. "You needed my help more than riding down that sidewinder."

Alva sat down dazedly, staring at her tattered shirt and scuffed riding breeches. She had lost one boot and her right ankle was throbbing violently.

The man who had rescued her from certain death was clawing his way through the brush to reach the east rim of the arroyo. One glance told him that the girl's attacker was too far away to hope of capturing. The escaping fiend had vanished beyond a hogback to eastward, leaving the dust of his passage lingering in a yellow boil on the sweltering air.

He returned to the pit of the arroyo to find the girl limping up the road toward the sprawled figure of the dead man. As he came alongside her, Alva Ferris started violently, as if she did not in the least remember him.

"Don't worry, ma'am," he said. "I won't harm you. Is that—man yonder—any kin of yours?"

The girl nodded in bewildered agony. "My father. He shot Dad in cold blood."

The stranger said gently, "I was riding along the sage flats up there on my way to Riobend when I heard the shot and edged over to investigate. I was one minute too late to save your father's life, I guess."

Alva Ferris lifted tortured eyes to get her first good look at this man whose quick action had spared her from a grisly death.

Few riders lived to tell about being stirrup dragged by a runaway pony.

"I owe you—my life—sir," she panted. "My name is—Ferris. Alva Ferris."

The stranger's jaw dropped. He shot a quick glance up the arroyo toward the girl's murdered father.

"Then that will be—Fenn Ferris? The one-time sheriff?"

Alva Ferris nodded, too numb with grief to speak.

"The hombre who killed him was Duff Probus."

The words startled the bereaved girl out of her mental stupor. She turned wide questioning eyes up at the stranger as they resumed walking toward the dead man lying in the road.

"Yes. Duff Probus. It seems my father had sent him to prison—before I was born. Probus came back to get vengeance . . ."

The stranger nodded, lips compressed in a bitter line.

"You know all this?" Alva asked. "Who are you?"

The man hesitated. Then he said, "I am Jim Hatfield, ma'am. Of the Texas Rangers. I was assigned to come out to Perdido County and see if I could dab my loop on Probus before he—before he could ambush your father."

The girl halted stockstill, staring at Hatfield.

"You are the Lone Wolf Ranger, then!"

He nodded, embarrassed by the frank hero-worship in her eyes.

"I've heard of you often, Mr. Hatfield," Alva said. "My father has often spoken of you, although he never met you."

Jim Hatfield said gently, "That ankle of yours is sprained. I'm going to leave you with your father for a few moments while I go after his horse. There'll be time enough to get on Probus' trail after we get your father to town and see you delivered to a competent doctor."

THE Lone Wolf Ranger left the girl kneeling beside the corpse of her father, knowing her acute need for a private communion with the dead.

A whistle brought Goldy trotting to his side. Mounting, Hatfield unbuckled the coiled lass'-rope from his pommel and headed off along the arroyo road toward where he saw Fenn Ferris' pony grazing in a patch of grama grass.

He roped the steeldust gelding without difficulty and led it back to where Alva was silently weeping beside her father's corpse, clinging to the dead man's gnarled hands as if she could not bear to let him go.

During the time it took the Ranger to hoist Ferris' body across the steeldust's saddle and rope it in place, however, the girl revealed her thoroughbred upbringing by getting herself firmly under control.

"There's no doubt," she said in a steady voice, "that this man Probus was on his way out to the ranch when he met us heading for town. You know, I think Daddy was trying to get me away from the ranch because he knew he might be ambushed. He got the mail this morning. Word of Probus' coming must have been in that mail, thinking back on the strange way Dad acted."

Hatfield unhobbled the girl's strawberry roan and brought it up, helping her mount. Aside from numerous bruises and scratches, Alva had nothing more than a possible sprained ankle to account for her narrow escape.

"I imagine," the Ranger said when they got under way with the ex-sheriff's pony folowing at the end of a trail rope, "that the Santa Casita prison warden telegraphed your father. Probus didn't waste any time heading out this way. He only escaped two days ago, and the penitentiary is a hundred miles southeast of here."

They rode in silence past the place where Duff Probus had left the arroyo. Jim Hatfield cursed himself mentally for only shooting to graze the man he had caught in the act of murdering this lovely girl. It went against his code to shoot a man who was unaware of his danger. Had his bullet killed Probus, he could write off this part of the assignment of Captain McDowell's as finished, and Fenn Ferris' brutal killing would have been avenged.

As they neared the cowtown of Riobend, built on a bluff overlooking the mighty Rio Grande, Alva spoke for the first time during the eight-mile ride from the scene of Ferris' murder.

"I am engaged to marry the marshal here, Theodore Ralls. He lives in this boarding house here, the one with the red roof. If—if you don't mind—I'd rather not go on into town."

Hatfield reined up in front of the boarding house the girl had indicated.

"I understand," he said gently. "I'll turn your father over to the coroner as soon as I've located a doctor for you. Then I'll let your fiancé know what happened. His office will be in the town calaboose, I reckon?"

Alva nodded, fighting to hold back her tears as Hatfield helped her dismount. As they were heading up the pebbled pathway toward the boarding house where Alva would await the coming of her future husband and the Riobend doctor, Hatfield heard the young woman hailed by name by a cowpuncher who was driving a small herd of Hereford bulls out of town.

"That's one of my father's riders, Mr. Hatfield," Alva said. "Del Keefer. I—I'll have to tell him to take over at the ranch."

The Ranger turned to see Del Keefer pulling over to stare aghast at the dead man lashed to the steeldust. A ruddy-faced, stockily-built cowman of middle age, Keefer appeared to be completely stunned at what he saw.

"It's the boss?" Keefer cawed out in a shocked voice. "Bushwhacked! Old Fenn gone this way! I can't believe it."

Hatfield remained where he was as Alva limped back to the gate and conversed for a few moments with the rider, who had dismounted and stood with Stetson in hand, unable to take his eyes off Ferris' death-contorted face.

Suddenly the girl turned and beckoned for Hatfield to join them.

"Del, shake hands with Jim Hatfield," the girl said. "This is Del Keefer, my father's cavvy wrangler. He's been to San Antonio to buy some blooded Herefords to build up our herd."

Over the handshake, the Twin F Connected man inquired sharply, "Hatfield? Not the Texas Ranger?"

Hatfield's intention was to shake his head, denying his identity, for it was vital that he remain incognito on this case. He had no way of knowing who Probus' friends might be in this country. He had not thought to warn Alva against introducing him as a Texas Ranger; that information he would impart to the marshal, Ted Ralls, but no one else. But it was too late now. Before he could speak. Alva Ferris said proudly,

"Yes, he's the Lone Wolf Ranger you've heard so much about, Del. He came out here to try and arrest Duff Probus, knowing Probus might come gunning for Dad. If—if he had been just two minutes further along the trail this morning—"

The girl's voice broke off. In giving his attention to the young woman, Jim Hatfield did not see the near-panic which stormed across Keefer's face upon learning Hatfield's identity.

"Well, I—I better get these bulls choused out to the home spread," Keefer stammered. "Miss Alva, you know how I feel about you. If there's anything I can do to help, just ask me. Reckon you know I'd plow heaven and hell for you."

Alva said, "Thank you, Del. I know you would."

Keefer shifted his glance toward Hatfield. "It's been an honor meetin' the most famous Texas Ranger in Texas," the cowman said. "If anybody can dab his loop on Probus, I reckon you're the man."

Taking Alva's arm, Hatfield said noncommittally, "I'll thank you to keep my identity under your hat, Keefer."

Heading back toward the boarding house, Hatfield said, "Keefer acts pretty familiar to another man's fiancé, don't he?"

Alva smiled wanly. "Del thinks he's in love with me."

"I'm sorry he knows I'm a Ranger," Hatfield said. "I had preferred to work incognito on this case."

Out on the road, spurring to overtake

the jag of bulls, Del Keefer was thinking, "I've got to let Probus know the Lone Wolf is prowlin' his back-track. I'm lucky Hatfield didn't drill Probus before he had a chance to dig up that loot."

CHAPTER V

Trail of a Killer

JIM HATFIELD headed uptown as soon as he had turned Alva Ferris over to the motherly Irish housewife who ran the boarding house. His first objective was to locate a doctor to check the girl's injured ankle.

Luckily, he found Riobend's medico in his office. Dr. Benj Atsatt was also the deputy county coroner, and as such directed Hatfield to carry Fenn Ferris' corpse to the back room he used as a morgue.

Because this was the heat of the day and Riobend's populace—the bulk of them Mexican—were off the streets taking their daily siesta, Hatfield attended to his grisly duty without attracting attention. He knew the stir this murder would cause.

Uppermost in the Lone Wolf Ranger's mind was getting back to the scene of Ferris' murder and picking up Duff Probus' trail, while it was still fresh. But he had promised Alva Ferris that he would notify her fiance, Marshal Ted Ralls, of what had happened and for that reason, the Ranger went directly from the coroner's office to the town jail, situated on a side street.

He found Ted Ralls to be a likable young Texan in his early twenties, possessed of a shock of rust-red hair, cheeks polka-dotted with freckles which made him look younger than he was, and a husky physique which made it easy to see why Riobend had elected him to ramrod their town.

Ralls showed his tremendous shock at the news of his prospective father-in-law's murder. He had on his desk a telegram from the Santa Casita penitentiary warden, advising him of Duff Probus' escape and warning him to keep a sharp lookout for the former Lost River rancher.

The marshal agreed to Hatfield's suggestion. "I'll keep Alva here in town, of course. Soon as I've dropped around Mrs. Haggarty's to see how she is, I'll join you, Hatfield. My legal jurisdiction doesn't extend outside of the town here, but if you're aiming to track down Probus, you oughtn't to tackle it alone. He had help bustin' out of that pen, you know."

Hatfield, already on his way out of the jail office, said earnestly, "I work faster alone, Ted, and I mean no offense. Besides, I don't want you running any risks of making Alva a widow before she even marries you."

As Hatfield tightened Goldy's cinch and swung astride the sorrel, impatient to leave town, the young marshal grinned up at him in a rueful way.

"Always the Lone Wolf, ain't you?" he commented good-naturedly. "Well, Jim, I'll tell you what. I aim to turn the town over to my deputy and ride out to Ferris' ranch this afternoon, to pass Alva's orders along to the ramrod. Might spend the night there. If you need me, swing by Twin F. It's the only ranch on Lost River."

Hatfield was turning his golden sorrel away from the hitchrack when a thought struck him.

"Marshal, this hombre Del Keefer—I understand he's been away from Perdido County on a stock-buying trip to San Antone. Which means he was in the vicinity of Santa Casita when Probus made his break. What do you know about Keefer's character and loyalty?"

Young Ralls shrugged.

"He showed up six-seven years back and Fenn hired him to bust broncs. Only bone I got to pick with him is that Keefer is sweet on my girl. He even asked Alva to marry him once."

Hatfield nodded gravely. "Reason I asked, Alva let him know I'm a Ranger. . . . Well, *hasta la vista.* I might see you over at Twin F tonight, and I might not.

I aim to follow Probus' trail as long as the light holds."

Leaving Riobend, Hatfield held Goldy to an easy jog-trot, knowing he might be in saddle for many hours to come. Goldy was gaunted from the long trek down from Paisano, the Big Bend town where he had left the Border Limited just before dawn.

ARRIVING at the side gully where Duff Probus had made his getaway from the arroyo road, Hatfield picked up the outlaw's sign at once. Unless Probus knew some tricks, he could follow the trail without difficulty in the sandy soil. Reaching the level mesa, he saw where Probus had headed due north.

By mid-afternoon, Hatfield had followed the outlaw's trail fifteen miles. Probus had made a wide loop, swinging west toward the gorge of Lost River.

The Ranger realized that Probus probably had a rifle in his saddle boot, and that he might very well hole up behind some rocky outcrop and wait for the law to ride within range of his Winchester. But that was a chance Hatfield had to take. He knew that Probus would remain in Texas only long enough to pick up his long-hidden loot, and then he would probably cross the Rio Grande to hide in the remote *cordilleras* of Chihuahua, beyond the reach of Ranger law. There was not an hour to be lost now.

Shortly before sundown, the Lone Wolf Ranger spotted a dead horse lying on the crest of a hogback within sight of the Lost River canyon. Riding up, he saw that it was an apaloosa gelding, bearing a brand which he later learned was that of the Mexitex stable in Riobend.

The apaloosa had broken a foreleg in a badger hole and the rider had ended its suffering with a bullet in the brain.

The dead animal's iron-shod hoofs tallied with the spoor left by Probus' getaway. From here on, the outlaw had been forced to go afoot. That was a break in Hatfield's favor.

He picked up the tracks of high-heeled cowboots, heading westward toward Lost River. Dusk overtook Hatfield at a high wooden bridge which spanned the canyon at a narrow point between the seamed rimrocks.

Hundreds of feet below, the river boiled through its rocky channel, carrying the floodwaters from the Chisos Mountains toward its unknown subterranean junction with the Rio Grande.

In all probability, Duff Probus had crossed over to the west side of the gorge by way of this bridge. But Hatfield could not be sure. Night was fast approaching, making further tracking impossible. To make matters worse, he was weak from hunger and Goldy was badly in need of rest.

A light twinkled through the blue twilight to the southward, marking an outlying ranch house. In all probability that was the ill-fated Fenn Ferris' home; all the cattle grazing on this range bore the Twin F Connected brand.

Reluctantly, Jim Hatfield turned Goldy away from the Lost River bridge. Twenty minutes later he was riding up to a prosperous ranch headquarters. A group of cowpunchers were unsaddling by the remuda corral. They verified the fact that this was the Ferris ranch.

After he had groomed and grained his stallion in the Twin F barn, Hatfield joined the crew at supper in the cook shack. The men ate in morose silence; the news of their boss' murder had reached them this afternoon when Del Keefer got in with the blooded bulls.

"Where is Keefer, by the way?" the Ranger inquired, glancing around the long table.

A lanky Texan who was the Twin F Connected range boss said indifferently, "Fenn wanted those Hereford bulls put in special graze at the north end of our spread. Del'll probably spend the night at a line camp cabin."

Leaving the cookhouse, Hatfield made his way to Ferris' tile-roofed Monterey ranchhouse. He had been told at the bunkhouse where he had washed up for supper that the Riobend marshal, Ted Ralls, was spending the night at the main house.

HE FOUND Alva's intended husband eating alone in what had been Fenn Ferris' ranch office. Ralls listened attentively to the Ranger's account of his afternoon trailing job, which had seemingly ended at the Lost River bridge.

"Probus' old ranch was right across the canyon from here," Ralls explained. "You can see the ruins of his old adobe winery from the window yonder."

Hatfield said, "Hardly seems likely Probus would risk returning to his old home. I know he was in Riobend because the saddle on that dead horse carried the name-plate of the Mexitex Livery Barn on its cantle."

Ralls stared moodily at his plate of untouched food. Clearly, the tragedy of today had been a severe blow to this clean-cut young man who, as a result of Ferris' death, and because of his approaching marriage to Alva, would soon become the boss of Twin F Connected.

"Way I figure it," Ralls said gloomily, "Probus made a beeline for Riobend after he broke out of Santa Casita. We'll find out tomorrow if he rented that apaloosa personally or had one of his accomplices get him the horse. Anyway, he headed directly for the ranch here. It was Fenn's bad luck that he ran into Probus on the way to town with Alva."

After a short discussion, during which Hatfield got the good news that Alva Ferris' ankle was only slightly sprained, Ralls escorted the Ranger to a spare bedroom in the east wing of the Twin F house, despite Hatfield's intention of borrowing blankets and sleeping in the bunkhouse with the crew.

"I'll have Chee Ling get us a breakfast ready before daylight *mañana*," Ralls said, "so we can get up to the Lost River bridge as early as possible and check on those tracks of Probus. If he was heading for his old spread, you can bet it's because that Encinal Roundup loot is buried somewhere around there."

Tugging off his boots, the Lone Wolf

[*Turn page*]

A DIME BUYS A DOLLAR'S WORTH OF *SHAVING PLEASURE!*

ALSO IN HANDY DISPENSER 10 for 30¢

BLUE STAR Blades are Sharper, Longer-Lasting because they are ground and honed in oil.

No other blade gives you so much for so little! Try a Blue Star Blade on hard-to-shave spots. See how smoothly, easily it takes off the toughest whiskers. For better shaving at a real saving, get Blue Star Blades today.

Blue STAR
SINGLE EDGE RAZOR BLADES

DECISION ASR PRODUCTS

AMERICAN SAFETY RAZOR CORP., BROOKLYN 1, N.Y.

Ranger asked the young marshal, "Has any real search ever been made for that dinero?"

Ralls turned in the doorway and grinned. "Any search? Why, there hasn't been a square inch of Probus' ranch that hasn't been dug up by treasure-hunters. Used to be my boyhood hobby, looking for Probus' loot. Kids have practically torn down the old winery looking for it. Wherever Probus hid it during those days old Fenn was hunting for him with that posse, you can bet Probus chose a safe spot."

Shortly after Hatfield went to bed, glad of the chance to get a night's rest, he heard voices in the front part of the house. Del Keefer was back from the north graze where he had put the Hereford bulls, and apparently had come over from the bunkhouse to find out if Alva Ferris had returned from town.

After Ralls had dismissed the Twin F puncher, Jim Hatfield lay staring into the darkness of his bedroom, his brain too full of conjecture to permit his much-needed sleep.

He kept reminding himself that Del Keefer had been conveniently away from this county at the exact time that Probus had escaped from the penitentiary, with outside help. What if Probus had come back from Santa Casita aboard the cattle car with Keefer? If Ralls discovered tomorrow that Keefer had rented the apaloosa from the Mexitex Livery in Riobend—

Climbing out of bed, Jim Hatfield went to the window of the bedroom and stared out through the star-dusted night. Not a hundred yards away was the awesome depths of the Lost River chasm. Within gunshot range of this window was the ranch Duff Probus had owned twenty years ago, before he had pulled off the mass slaughter and robbery of the Encinal stock buyers. It gave the Ranger a prickly sensation down the spine to realize that the outlaw Captain McDowell had dispatched him to capture might be somewhere over on the bleak, ebon hills west of Lost River this very moment.

HATFIELD tried to tell himself that his imagination was working overtime tonight, that the malaise which gripped him whenever he turned his thoughts toward the cavvy wrangler, Del Keefer, was sheer nervousness.

"But if Keefer *was* working with Duff Probus, the two might have seen each other this afternoon," Hatfield mused inwardly. "Their paths had to cross, if Keefer took those blooded bulls north of the bridge Probus seemed to be heading for."

If the two had met, then Duff Probus knew that a Texas Ranger was on his trail, that the bullet wound Probus had suffered on his forearm had come from the guns of the Lone Wolf Ranger. It followed logically that Keefer, if he were in league with the escaped convict, could let Probus know that Hatfield was a guest at Ferris' ranch house tonight.

The feeling that peril was stalking abroad tonight was too persistent to be overlooked. Finally, giving in shamefacedly to his hunches, Hatfield moved his blankets over to a dark corner of the bedroom, well away from the window at the foot of the bed.

Stretched out there with only a blanket between him and the floor, his six-guns handy to his reach, Jim Hatfield went to sleep at once, his dreams untroubled by any foreboding about the manhunt trail he would resume at dawn tomorrow. And at that precise moment, Del Keefer was riding to a rendezvous on the far side of Lost River's gorge with Duff Probus and Marfa Bilidoux.

CHAPTER VI

Death in the Night

IT WAS Stygian black in the pit off Lost River's gorge where Duff Probus and Marfa Bilidoux had their secret camp. Four hundred feet overhead, the wooden bridge made its spidery track

across the narrow ribbon of star-sprinkled Texas sky.

Early this morning—it seemed an eternity away—the three outlaws had arrived in Riobend concealed in the stock car which had carried Del Keefer's jag of blooded Hereford bulls from San Antone. They had boarded that car secretly after their fast getaway from the penitentiary town, Santa Casita. Such a mode of travel had been a fantastically lucky break for Probus.

They had left their getaway horses in San Antonio, but Del Keefer had had no difficulty in renting mounts for his two henchmen at the Mexitex Livery. Marfa Bilidoux, carrying out Probus' instructions, had headed at once for the Lost River bridge, where he had located the rocky ledge which enabled him to reach this hideout in the bottom of the gorge.

Shortly after sundown Duff Probus had arrived at the rendezvous, on foot and with a bloody bullet track creasing his forearm. Bilidoux had listened with growing concern to the convict's account of how he had carried out his revenge on the sheriff who had sent him to prison nearly twenty years ago.

"The hombre who kept me from shooting down Ferris' girl was Jim Hatfield, the Ranger," Probus had reported. "I met Del out on the range this afternoon hazing those bulls, and he told me that. It was a narrow shave."

Bilidoux had made no bones about his desire to get his share of the promised loot and head back to Marfa, where he worked as a stable hostler. But in view of this day's happenings, Probus refused to be rushed into fulfilling his share of the bargain.

"That swag we vamosed with twenty years back is in a safe place, further down the river from here," Probus had said. "In order to reach the cache I'd have to visit my old spead, in full view of Ferris' ranch house on the east rim."

"Let's pick it up tonight, then," Bilidoux insisted. "I don't like it, knowin' this Hatfield hombre is sniffin' our tracks."

Probus remained adamant. "Nobody'll find us down here," he said. "That rock ledge don't show tracks. Keefer will keep us supplied with grub and ca'tridges. Why, it's a foregone conclusion Hatfield will post himself over on my old stamping grounds and wait for me to show up."

Bilidoux shuddered. The sound of Lost River plunging through the gorge filled the night with a sinister roar which struck pure fear through his vitals. He was beginning to wonder if Probus might be lying about the Encinal Roundup loot. He only had Probus' word for it that the two hundred thousand was safely cached. What if Probus had dropped those saddle-bags in the Rio Grande at the time Sheriff Fenn Ferris overtook him?

Shortly after midnight, the two outlaws were roused by a sound of steel-shod hoofs coming up the gravelly strip under the overhanging cliffs from the direction of the ledge trail.

Probus and Bilidoux were instantly on their feet, guns palmed. In both their minds was the same thought: Hatfield, using the uncanny tracking ability for which he was famous, had somehow managed to cut their sign even in the thick of night.

A moment later, above the river's sullen thunder, they heard Del Keefer hailing them. Bilidoux' horse, hobbled in a fissure of the beetling cliff nearby, whickered loudly as he picked up the scent of Keefer's pony.

PROBUS struck a match to guide his confederate through the pitch blackness. Keefer stepped down from saddle and ground-hitched his horse, his boots crunching over the dank rubble as he entered the cavernlike hollow where Probus had chosen to lie down.

"Thought you ought to know that Jim Hatfield's spendin' the night at the ranch, Duff," the Twin F cavvy wrangler reported. "And Ted Ralls, the marshal from town, is with him."

Probus swore a grim oath into the darkness. "Easy to see what those star-packers are up to," he grated. "They'll head for my old spread first thing in the morn-

ing. And as long as they camp over there waitin' for me to show up, that cache will be impossible to reach."

Keefer said grimly, "What's to prevent you and Marfa going back to the ranch tonight and giving Ralls and Hatfield the same dose we gave them stock buyers at Encinal twenty years ago? Stab 'em in their sleep. I know what rooms they're in."

Marfa Bilidoux protested sharply, "I don't like it. I can see your game, Del Keefer. Being in love with that Ferris girl, you figure with Ralls out of the way maybe you'll have a chance to marry her and be the kingpin on Ferris' ranch."

Keefer grinned in the darkness. Bilidoux had struck closer to the truth than he knew. During the train ride out from San Antonio yesterday, Keefer had confided to his chief that marrying Alva Ferris had been uppermost in his mind ever since he had hired out at the Twin F Connected.

"Del's got somethin' there," Probus growled. "Ralls and Hatfield are the only John Laws standing between me and making my getaway to Chihuahua. We'll never get a better chance to cash in their chips than we got tonight. They don't know Keefer is working with us."

Bilidoux complained bitterly, "Simplest thing to do is ride over to wherever you cached that dinero, Duff, now that we know Hatfield ain't on the west side of this river. By daylight we could have the swag divided three ways and be through with this business."

Probus was already walking over to the hobbled horse, dragging Bilidoux' saddle with him. From the darkness beyond the campsite came Probus' heavy voice:

"You forget twenty years has passed by since I ditched that loot, Marfa. It's inside the tunnel where the river goes underground. To reach it I got to go through an old cavern that I used to use for a wine cellar. Chances are the entrance has been overgrown with brush, maybe covered up with dirt and rock. Might take days to dig it out."

Probus led the horse back to where his henchmen stood waiting.

"I'm riding back to Ferris' ranch with you, Del," Probus said. "If you want to stay here, Bilidoux, suit yourself. I aim to make sure Hatfield and that marshal ain't around to bother me when I go after that cache."

For a moment, Marfa Bilidoux was about to refuse to make this trek to the Twin F. Then the disturbing thought struck him that Keefer and Probus might be planning a double-cross, to leave him out of the division of the loot. With nearly seventy thousand dollars at stake, the rewards of a hold-up he had participated in nearly twenty years previously, this was no time to let his confederates out of his sight.

"Reckon I've come this far, I won't back out now," Bilidoux grumbled. "I'll ride double with you, Duff."

An hour later Del Keefer led the way over the Lost River rimrock and headed through the mealy, overcast night toward the Twin F Connected ranch.

AS THEY rode, Keefer explained carefully the location of the bedrooms where they would find Marshal Ted Ralls and Jim Hatfield.

"I got to slip into my soogans at the bunkhouse so's I'll be on hand and accounted for by the rest of the crew tomorrow morning," Keefer explained his reason for not wanting to take any active part in murdering the two lawmen tonight. "You see, I won't be leavin' the country like you two. I aim to stick around and play for high stakes—marrying Alva and becoming the bull of the herd on this ranch."

Probus agreed to Keefer's suggestions without comment. From the very first, when he had conceived his daring plan to break out of the Santa Casita penitentiary, Probus had had no intention of sharing his loot with the men who had helped him make that jail-break. He alone knew where the cache was located. When time came for the pay-off, Keefer and Bilidoux would receive the coin of bushwhack bullets, not gold or greenbacks.

Skirting the east rim of the gorge, where the thunder of the river would drown out the sound of hoofbeats, the three outlaws rode abreast of the sleeping ranch. Scudding clouds hid the stars of earlier in the evening, making this night an ideal one for the murder mission at hand.

After a final coaching regarding the location of the lawmen's bedrooms, Keefer left his two partners, heading for the remuda corral to unsaddle his pony. The crew, tired from a hard day's work, had been snoring in their blankets at the Twin F bunkhouse when Keefer had ridden in from the north range tonight. Tomorrow morning, when he woke up with the others, no man would know that he had been away on his furtive night mission.

Hitching their horses in readiness for a fast getaway, Probus and Bilidoux, who was distinctly ill at ease about his part in what was to come, headed for the unseen bulk of Ferris' rambling California-style ranch home.

When they reached the corner of the east wing, Probus put his lips close to the ear of his unwilling partner and whispered, "According to Del, this first window to the left is the one to Hatfield's bedroom. After we finish off the Ranger, we'll head down the hall three doors to where the marshal is bunking. Keep close behind me."

With infinite stealth the two gunmen inched along the whitewashed adobe wall until they were abreast of Hatfield's window. Through it, they could hear the measured tempo of the sleeping Ranger's breathing.

Loosing his guns in holsters, Duff Probus placed his hands on the sill of the wide-open window and slowly pulled himself astraddle of the sill. Making no sound to rouse the slumbering lawman, Probus reached out and assisted Bilidoux in coming into the bedroom.

They moved away from the window, their boots silent on the Navajo rug, and paused to reorient themselves. They no longer could hear Hatfield's breathing, but as their eyes accustomed themselves to the gloom, they made out the foot of the bed.

Slowly, the prowlers crept their way along either side of the bed, Probus taking the precaution of going on all fours to keep from showing himself against the faintly-seen rectangle of the open window.

Bilidoux had his long-bladed Mexican *cuchillo* out of its sheath as he approached the outer edge of the bed, Probus having crept into the narrow alley between the wall and the opposite side of the bed.

WHEN they came even with where the sleeping man's chest would be, quick thrusts of the deadly blades should put the most famous Ranger in all Texas beyond the land of the living. Then they would proceed to the room where Keefer said Marshal Ted Ralls was sleeping.

Bilidoux's coiled fingers were slick with perspiration as he clutched the haft of his Bowie. He was mentally trying to locate the bulk of Hatfield's long shape under the blankets when his ears caught the ominous double click of a six-gun coming to full cock.

Momentarily, Bilidoux believed that Probus had changed his mind and planned to shoot Hatfield. To do so would be to rouse Ted Ralls and any other sleepers in this house. Bilidoux was opening his mouth to whisper a word of caution to his partner on the far side of the bed when he suddenly realized that the sound of the cocking gun came from the opposite direction, across the room.

"Hold where you are, both of you!"

Jim Hatfield's sharp voice sounded like a thunderclap in the room.

With a choked oath of desperation, Bilidoux dropped his knife and clawed out his six-gun. Whirling in the direction of the Ranger's voice, Bilidoux jerked trigger.

The flash of bore flame revealed the Texas Ranger standing spread-legged against the opposite wall, a Colt .45 in either hand. Bilidoux' shots had been wide of the mark, hammering into the adobe wall to Hatfield's left.

On the opposite side of the bed, Duff

Probus turned quickly on his haunches and scuttled toward the window. Bilidoux's guns were roaring their deafening thunder as the crazed outlaw fired shot after shot at the spot where he had seen the Ranger's crouched figure.

Then, from a position several yards to one side, came the sharp answering crash of Hatfield's guns.

Their red flash showed Duff Probus the buckling shape of his partner, slammed back against the bed by the unerring slugs from the Ranger's gun.

Sucking in a deep breath, Probus reached for the window sill and did a leap-frog dive outside the bedroom. He landed on all fours and like a sprinter starting a race, leaped to his feet and slogged off into the night.

Jim Hatfield's vision had been blinded by the spurting flashes from Bilidoux's guns, and the powdersmoke which filled this room prevented him from seeing Probus' desperate bid for escape.

Now, hearing the clatter of Probus' boots crossing the yard outside, Hatfield lunged across the room and leaned out the window. Through the felty darkness he picked up the sound of the escaping fugitive's line of flight, and laid three desperation shots in the direction from which the footsteps sounded.

The sound of running ceased, and for an instant Hatfield believed he had bagged his target, shooting blind in the dark.

Then the illusion was shattered when he heard the rataplan of a horse's hoofs beating up echoes along the Lost River gorge, as the escaping prowler headed northward at a reaching gallop.

Ted Ralls was shouting out in the corridor leading to Hatfield's room. As the Ranger turned away from the door, knowing that pursuit of the mounted man was useless, the Riobend marshal kicked open his door and came into the room with a sixgun in his hand.

"Hold your fire, Ted!" Hatfield cried sharply. "I'm *muy bueno*. A couple of visitors paid me a little call through the window. I've tallied one of them. He's over by the bed."

HOLSTERING his guns, the Ranger pulled down the window blind and struck a match. Touching it to a lamp on the bedside dresser, he and Ted Ralls found themselves staring at the crumpled, bleeding body of Hatfield's bullet-riddled victim.

Marfa Bilidoux was writhing in his death-throes alongside the bed. His smoking gun lay on the floor beside the knife he had dropped.

Ralls, clad in his underwear but toting a six-gun, leaped across the room and knelt to roll the dying man over on his back.

"Never saw this buscadero around Perdido County," Ralls panted. "You, Jim?"

Hatfield stared down at Bilidoux's twisted, black-stubbled face and shook his head. He hunkered down beside the outlaw as he saw Bilidoux's black eyes flicker open.

"Your partner vamosed and left you to go to blazes alone," Hatfield said gently. "Who was he? Duff Probus?"

Bilidoux nodded, a death-rattle already clogging his throat.

"Probus—cached loot—Lost River," the dying man wheezed. "I'm—Baptiste La-Truex—one of the six who pulled the Encinal holdup—twenty years back. John Cunkelman and me—got Probus out of pen. He's the double-crossin' son you want. He's hid—"

Ralls and Jim Hatfield leaned closer to catch the man's expiring words, knowing La Truex was seeking reprisal against the outlaw who had deserted him without firing a shot.

But the gagging noises tapered off into an unintelligible mumbo jumbo of words. A paroxysm wracked the bullet-riddled body, one spurred boot beating a tattoo on the bloodstained floor.

Then all movement left LaTruex's body.

"Dead," Jim Hatfield muttered, getting to his feet. "At least we know Probus and Cunkelman are hiding out somewhere close by. We'll locate 'em tomorrow unless they decide to head for Mexico. Which I doubt, the way he went north along Lost River just now."

CHAPTER VII

Ambush Attack

AS DEL KEEFER and the rest of the Twin F crew were leaving the bunkhouse on their way to breakfast at dawn next morning, they saw the town marshal and Jim Hatfield riding off, following the northerly course of Lost River.

Keefer, alone of the Twin F cowpunchers, had heard the brief exchange of gunfire in the Ferris ranchhouse last night. The wrangler had just slipped into his bunk when he heard the rapid beat of hoofs which told him that only one of his partners had made a getaway. Keefer had spent the rest of the night worrying for fear Duff Probus had been killed, in which case the secret of the long-hidden Lost River cache would never be solved.

It was with real relief, then, that Keefer learned from the Chinese cook that there was a dark-complexioned dead man to be loaded on a buckboard and removed to the Riobend morgue this morning. That would be Keefer's partner and long-time friend Marfa Bilidoux, real name Baptiste LaTruex.

Keefer felt no sense of loss in learning that Bilidoux had not survived last night's shoot-out. It meant that he would get half of the dead man's share of the loot.

Just as he was sitting down to breakfast, Del Keefer had a grim thought occur to him. Probus was alone now. What if he had deliberately lured Bilidoux into a trap to get rid of him? What was to prevent Probus from rifling his cache and high-tailing it out of Texas, without living up to his bargain with Keefer?

Suddenly losing his appetite, Keefer excused himself and raced out to the remuda corral, roped and saddled the fastest horse in his personal string, and without making any report to the foreman, headed at full gallop toward the old wooden bridge which spanned the Lost River gorge.

If he failed to find Duff Probus at their temporary hideout below the bridge, it might mean that the escaped convict had kept going after last night's escape from Hatfield's flaming guns, fleeing into the Big Bend wilderness without pausing to locate the Encinal loot.

Topping a ridge a mile from the bridge, Keefer reined up. In his preoccupation with Duff Probus' possible double-crossing him, Keefer had completely forgotten the fact that two lawmen were likewise hunting Probus this morning—Ralls and Hatfield.

He saw them now, riding slowly along the east brink of the canyon. Obviously they were trying to pick up traces of Probus' getaway trail from last night—something well nigh impossible due to the slabrock nature of the surface.

Keefer breathed easier when he saw the two lawmen pass up the brush-concealed entrance to the ledge trail which Probus would have taken last night if he had gone back to their camp.

Then he saw Jim Hatfield alight from his golden horse and examine a minute clue on the basalt rimrock. Apparently he found something of keen interest, for when he remounted, it was to head on toward the bridge at a faster pace, Ted Ralls flanking his stirrup.

"That dirty polecat of a Probus went back to his old spread last night," Keefer muttered to himself. "He's had all night to lift that treasure and ride off with it. I let him play me for a sucker. I shouldn't have let Probus out of my sight."

Across the intervening distance came the rumbling hoofbeats of the lawmen's ponies as they crossed the ancient log-decked bridge. Keefer saw Hatfield scanning the ground on the west side of the canyon closely. Then they headed south, in the direction of Probus' old winery and ranch buildings.

PROBUS had crossed the river last night after his abortive murder mission to Fenn Ferris' place, that was obvious. And Del Keefer found himself almost hoping that the two pursuing law-

men would overtake the convict before he reached the Rio Grande.

Jim Hatfield, highly skilled man-tracker that he was, had no difficulty in retracing the route Duff Probus had taken last night. By lantern light that morning, he had studied the hoof prints left by the convict's pony at the point where the two prowlers had hitched the horses near the Ferris ranchhouse.

The hoofprints of the same horse were plain to read in the sandy soil now. Even Ted Ralls, less skilled at reading sign, had deduced what Probus had done last night. Crossing the north bridge, he had doubled back toward the ruins of the ranch he had owned twenty years ago.

Topping a ridge, Hatfield reined up as he came in view of the tumble-down barns and fences of Probus' old headquarters, not a quarter of a mile away.

What caught his interest at the moment was the spectacular view they had of the box-end of Lost River Gorge, a half mile further on. The raging, silt-yellowed river plunged into a black-mawed cavern at the foot of the blind-end cliff, funneling down a series of rapids which put a steady roar like ocean surf on the lawmen's ears.

"There's what's left of Probus' home place, Jim," Ted Ralls was saying. "All those little mounds of dirt show where folks have dug in the past twenty years, trying to locate Probus' swag. They've ripped out the floor of his 'dobe, pulled up all his fence posts to look 'em over, plowed his vineyard a dozen times to my knowledge. Without turning up a red penny of that Encinal fortune."

Hatfield loosened his .30-30 carbine reposing in its scabbard under his right saddle fender. His greenish-black eyes were studying the ranch area with minute care, knowing that the moment they passed this skyline they might be within range of Probus' guns.

"Probus has had all night to work in," the Ranger said soberly. "I doubt if he's even on the Texas side of the Rio Grande by now. How far is it to those hills of Mexico yonder?"

As they started down the sage-tufted ridge, the Riobend marshal said, "Eight-nine miles as the buzzard flies; ten or twelve by horseback."

Hatfield spurred into the lead, his keen glance following Probus' route of last night as easily as if it had been a printed page. The feat amazed Ted Ralls, who had lost Probus' trail shortly after turning off the Lost River bridge.

"What bothers me," the Lone Wolf Ranger commented as they reached the flats where Probus' ruined buildings lay sprawled under the lifting sun, "is how Probus and that man I shot knew you and I were sleeping at Twin F Connected last night."

Ralls nodded. "I've been wondering about that angle myself," Ralls said. "You're suspicious of Ferris' cavvy wrangler, Del Keefer, aren't you?"

Hatfield said, "Several signs point to him maybe being in league with Probus, yes. What is your opinion of the man?"

Ted Ralls laughed. "I hate his guts, personally; but that may be unjust. You see, Keefer is in love with Alva. He's tried to flirt with her at every dance we go to, even though she has given him no possible reason to feel encouraged."

By this time they had reached the eroded ruins of what had been Probus' ranch home. The tracks of Probus' getaway pony led straight to the crumbled doorway.

DISMOUNTING, gun in hand, the Ranger stepped to the edge of the adobe wreckage and peered inside.

A horse was cropping at grass which was growing from the litter-strewn earthen floor of the shack. It was saddled and bridled, and the dried foam on its flanks indicated to Hatfield's horse-savvy inspection that Probus had left the animal here several hours ago.

In a matter of moments, Hatfield found the tracks of a man's boots, where Duff Probus had left the rear end of the adobe shack.

The tracks led off up a hill past a roofless haybarn. The hill had once been a flourishing grape vineyard. At its base was

a weed-grown ruin which Ted Ralls had previously identified as Probus' wine-press.

Returning to where Ralls was waiting on horseback, Hatfield stepped astride Goldy and made his succinct report:

"Probus headed on foot toward that ridge yonder. That might mean he went out to dig up his cache. At any rate it's doubtful he'd head all the way to the Rio Grande wearing a pair of tight-fitting Justins."

Young Ralls drew his own carbine from saddle boot as he spurred after the Ranger, both men keeping a sharp eye on the nearby barn, knowing the danger of being ambushed should Probus have doubled back to the building.

From this angle they had a clear view of the Twin F Connected ranchhouse, less than half a mile away on the opposite side of the box-end gorge of Lost River. This far from the rimrock the heavy roar of the racing waters was lost to their ears.

"I'm glad Alva's in town," Ted Ralls muttered. "If she'd come back to the ranch with me yesterday we couldn't have kept her from riding over here with us. She's a spunky kid. A mite too reckless at times."

Hatfield's eye was riveted to the line of boot prints marking Duff Probus' route of departure last night. It veered over to a tumble-down ruin of a board-and-bat shed which housed a rusty collection of farm machinery—a mowing machine, an old cider press, a two-gang plow, odds and ends of harness and other debris.

"He picked up a shovel from this old tool shed, Ted," the Lone Wolf Ranger explained, pointing to a crescent-shaped incision in the dirt. "That's where Probus struck the blade into the ground."

Ralls grinned his admiration for the Ranger's sharp eye.

"Which must mean he wanted a shovel to dig up that treasure with," the Rio-bend marshal deduced. "This is beginning to get exciting, Jim. Reminds me of the thrills I got reading *Treasure Island.* Probus, the pirate, digging up his—"

Ralls was interrupted by the high-pitched drone of a rifle bullet inches from his ear.

An instant later the morning quiet was shattered by the ear-riving report of a heavy-calibered rifle.

Jim Hatfield pulled Goldy to a plunging halt. He raked the skyline of the vineyard ridge with an alert eye, and was in time to see the morning breeze dissipating a smudge of gunpowder smoke at the north shoulder of the hillslope.

"Back to the barn!" Hatfield yelled, yanking his .30-30 from its boot. "Probus is bellied down just below the skyline yonder, but he—"

A SADDLE gun began beating up echoes again, this time coming from their rear—in the direction of the Probus adobe. Steel-jacketed missiles kicked up clods around their horses as both lawmen swung their mounts to face the threat from a totally different direction.

"We're caught in a cross-fire!" Hatfield cried. "Our only chance now is to fort up in Probus' old *vinateria* yonder!"

Hatfield had assessed their situation all too accurately. A riffleman concealed in the old adobe which they had left less than fifteen minutes ago was keeping up a steady fire at them, trying to correct his range. And from the flank of the hillside, beyond the expanse of ancient grapevines, the first attacker had resumed shooting with a .45-70.

The *vinateria,* or winery, was less than fifty yards away. Hatfield and Ralls headed toward it at a gallop, knowing they would find bullet-proof shelter behind its thick adobe walls.

Bullets shrieked in from two angles, chasing them until they sent their horses vaulting over a crumbled pile of adobe brick under a winery window. Once they

You Can Bet on Thrills and Action When You Read—

TRIPLE WESTERN

3 Novels Every Issue—Only 25c

were inside the high mud walls, both ambushers stopped shooting.

Hatfield swung out of stirrups, glancing around the interior of this building. Most of the wine-presses and other machinery had been carried away during the years Probus had been behind penitentiary walls. The entire roof was gone, with the exception of the gable rafters.

The south wall had crumbled away also, which exposed the interior of the *vinateria* to any gunman on the ridge above. From three sides, they were protected by three-foot-thick walls. But from the rear, they were wide-open to attack.

"Probus' other *compañero* must have followed us into the ranch this morning," Hatfield said sharply. "I imagine that was Probus himself who fired the first shot from the ridge."

Ralls was out of saddle, leading his horse over to a rusty steam engine which had provided the power for the wine presses. Probus, ostensibly a cattleman, had made a lot of money in the old days selling *vino* to the Mexican peons.

The Lone Wolf Ranger moved to the lower end of the winery and peered through a ruined portal in the direction of the Probus ranch house. His ears caught a muted drumming of hoofbeats, and he saw dust lifting in the heat-waves to northward. The rider who had opened fire on them from the rear was following an old irrigation canal around the north side of Probus' vineyard, obviously to join the first gunman behind the ridge.

A shout from Ted Ralls brought Hatfield spinning around. The Riobend marshal had bellied down behind the rusty boiler of the steam engine and was leveling his rifle at a target on the hillcrest above.

Ralls fired, and Hatfield saw a spurt of dust high on the slope. An instant later he saw a red-shirted figure scuttling out of sight on the far side of the ridge.

"That was probably Probus," the Ranger clipped grimly. "We couldn't reach the ranch buildings without getting smoked down, and if we stay in this winery we're cornered like rats."

CHAPTER VIII

Vanished Gunmen

TO MAKE their position doubly uncertain, the blazing disc of the sun was squarely in their eyes as they stared up at the crest of the vineyard ridge. The haphazard rows of grapevines, many of them grown almost to treelike proportions in the two decades they had been left untended, made ideal cover for Duff Probus and his henchman to choose a vantage point from which to pour lead into the winery enclosure.

Yet to leave the shelter of these walls was to invite certain death. From the winery to the outbuildings of Probus' ranch was wide-open ground offering no shelter from bushwhack guns.

The southwest corner of the building offered shelter for Goldy and Ralls' horse, and Hatfield picketed their mounts in that location, knowing that any minute the besieging guns would open fire on them.

He had not moved the horses out of sight an instant too soon. As Hatfield was moving back toward the steam engine where Ralls was crouched, two rifles opened fire from the leafy vineyard above the winery, one bullet plucking a slot in the crown of Hatfield's Stetson before he could dive to cover.

"They've got us trapped so long as the sun is in our eyes," Ralls panted, levering a cartridge into the breech of his Winchester. "One lucky thing, these walls aren't rock. Otherwise we'd be dodging richochets."

The shooting began in earnest now. Slugs smashed into the boiler and firebox of the old engine, some of them punching through the rusted metal. This was proof that Probus and his partner had their targets accurately located down in the winery.

Upwards of twenty rounds of steel-jacketed missiles smashed into the engine

before the initial phase of the siege ended. Eyes squinted against the blazing sun, Hatfield risked a peep over the top of the boiler to see dust moving from two different spots along the grapevine-covered hillside.

"They're crawling to different spots hoping to get our range," Hatfield whispered. "We can't stay behind this engine. Our best bet now is to dive through that window facing the ranch. We'll be okay behind that wall."

Ralls dragged a sleeve across his perspiring forehead.

"Yeah," the young marshal agreed. "That'll force Probus to swing wide in order to line his gunsights on the outside of the wall. And we won't have the sun in our eyes."

They agreed on the window they would the levers of their Winchesters.

"Back to the engine," the Ranger yelled. "They've got the window covered—"

ONE arm under Ralls' armpits, Hatfield half-dragged, half-carried the wounded lawman back to the uncertain shelter of the steam engine they had just left. To verify the Lone Wolf's words, the riflemen drove several shots through the window they had attempted to reach. That exit was barred to them now.

"It's only a scratch," Ralls panted, as Hatfield got out a pocket knife and cut his shirt sleeve at the elbow.

The wound was not serious, the slug having cut a clean crease through the egg of muscle on Ralls' upper arm. But it would get increasingly painful and would have a damaging effect on the accuracy

TRUE TEXAS FACTS

FIRST OF THE RANGERS: In the year 1840, the independent Republic of Texas organized its first company of Texas Rangers, which secured the Frontier and incidentally set going the greatest flow of books, stories, movies and musical comedies on any American theme. The first Texas Ranger was a stripling named John Coffee Hays, who at 23 was a seasoned surveyor, scout and Indian fighter. Born in Tennessee in 1817, he came to Texas after the battle of San Jacinto and served through that war of independence as a Scout under Captain Deaf Smith. As Jack Hays, first captain of the Rangers, he has carved a solid niche for himself in Texas' hall of fame.

head for. It was twenty feet away, and during that run they would be wide open to Probus' fire. But, under the circumstances, it was the only recourse they had.

At a signal from Hatfield, the two men leaped from their shelter and sprinted toward the specified window in the adobe wall. As the two bushwhackers caught sight of them they opened fire.

Less than half way to the window, Hatfield saw Ted Ralls sprawl face down in the dust. A crimson stain began discoloring one sleeve of his shirt.

The marshal was hit. Hatfield turned back to his friend's assistance, just as Ralls, his face white with pain, tried to reach his feet.

The gunmen on the hillside, shooting down through the open roof of the winery, were firing now as fast as they could yank of the marshal's gun aim the rest of this day.

From somewhere in the vineyard above them came Duff Probus' yell:

"Come out of there with your arms up, you star packers! It's the only chance you'll get to see sundown, I can tell you that here and now!"

The bayed lawmen ignored the outlaw's ultimatum, Hatfield busily ripping the shirt sleeve into bandages. After a few minutes he stemmed the flow of blood from Ralls' flesh wound and got the arm bandaged.

"We'll have to give up any idea of gunning back at those sidewinders, Ted," Hatfield said reluctantly. "Over in the corner where the walls protect the horses, we can wait out this day. It's our only show to save our hides."

Ralls, wincing from the throbbing pain of his wound, nodded grimly, knowing how much this admission went against the Ranger's grain.

"Yeah, while his pardner is keeping us under cover, Probus can be digging up that cache and heading for the Rio Grande," the marshal said. "Neither of us want that."

Leaving the shelter of the steam engine, the two men scuttled on all fours to the southwest corner where they joined the two horses. From the voices they heard up the hill they knew Probus and his unknown henchman were aware of their victims' defensive maneuver.

"Listen, Ted," Hatfield said after a pause. "I want you to lie low here. I'm getting out of this winery and into those grapevines. I'll have cover, as much cover as Probus has, in working my way up to a close range shoot-out with those polecats."

Ted Ralls bristled. "No," he said flatly. "We're in this manhunt together. I—"

Hatfield cut in, "You'll take your orders from me, marshal. Your badge don't mean a thing outside of Riobend. As a Ranger, I'll have the authority to make an arrest. I was assigned to track down Probus, with or without his loot."

Before Ralls could make further protest, the Lone Wolf Ranger was working his way along the adobe wall toward the north entrance through which they had come.

Gunshots blasted the morning quiet and rifle slugs hammered into the adobe bricks as the outlaws on the ridge saw Hatfield come into view. But those questing slugs failed to tally the Ranger as he vaulted through the opening in the *vinateria* wall and, coming into the open, sprinted for the nearest grapevines.

Inside the winery, Ted Ralls watched through a crack in the wall, relief flooding through him as he saw the Ranger vanish behind the green barrier of the vineyard. From now on he would have to wait helplessly here while Jim Hatfield stalked his dangerous game up the rough, vine-grown hillside.

SHOVING his Winchester before him, Hatfield wriggled his way at a quartering angle up the slope. The heavy green vines, weighted down with half-ripe grapes, made a jungle which cut visibility to but a few feet. He knew that Probus and the other gunman would lie low, listening for the first shake of a leaf or snap of a twig to tell them of Hatfield's approach.

The odds were against the Lone Wolf, but he accepted them with the grim fatalism of a man used to rubbing shoulders with danger in the daily pursuit of his trade as a lawman.

It took him an hour to reach the midway point up the ridge. In this leafy jungle of vineyard, the wind rustling the foliage made it impossible for him to pick up any scuttling noises to tell him of any movements Probus and his partner might be making.

By the same token, the continuous whispering of the breeze through the grapevines would mask his own stalking approach.

Suddenly a crackle of gunfire sounded from further down the ridge. Hatfield scowled with bewilderment as he heard bullets ripping through the vineyard, above and ahead of him.

"Come on, Duff!" a man shouted not twenty feet from where Hatfield lay. "Somebody's sidin' those tinstars!"

The voice was vaguely familiar, but at the moment the Ranger was mainly concerned with who was opening fire on Probus' position.

Above the murmur of the wind through the tangled vineyard he heard a thud of hoofs as a rider approached the ridge, coming from the north. He thought, "Did Ferris' cowhands see this gun-trap from the other side of the canyon and ride over here to back our play?"

Then he heard a crashing sound in the tangle of brush ahead. Coming to his feet amid armpit-deep vines, Hatfield had a fleeting glimpse of Duff Probus' shaven head as the Santa Casita convict vanished over the crest of the ridge. A smudge of dust further to the left indicated where

Probus' partner had similiarly retreated.

Hatfield slogged his way through the vines now, smashing furiously at the entwining tendrils with his rifle stock.

The verdure thinned out where alkali deposits had put a bald patch on the crest of the ridge. As the Ranger at last broke free of the encumbering jungle growth, he had his first look at the rider whose appearance had broken up this stalemate and forced Probus and the other bushwhacker to seek shelter beyond the ridge.

The identity of that rider came as a shock to Hatfield.

It was Alva Ferris, charging along the ridge crest in his direction on her strawberry roan. The girl saw him and waved, then pointed the smoking muzzle of her rifle toward the lower slope of the ridge to westward.

Hatfield looked in that direction. A trail of dust hung heavily in the air, marking the route Probus and his partner had gone. The dust eddies ended in a clearing half an acre in extent, near the base of the ridge.

Alva was spurring her roan toward that clearing. It was obvious that she had seen where the bushwhackers had gone.

Hatfield, aware of her danger, gesticulated wildly with his Winchester and shouted, "Get back! They'll ambush you!"

But the girl shook her head and continued spurring the roan down the steep flank of the hillside, her mount vaulting the rows of grapevines like a steeplechase animal.

"They ducked underground down there!" her call floated back to him. "Come on—I'll show you."

HATFIELD turned to glance toward the winery behind him. Marshal Ralls was peering over the ruined wall, rifle in hand.

"It's Alva!" Hatfield yelled. "Come on up!"

By the time Hatfield had slogged his way down to the edge of the clearing, fully expecting to see Alva shot from her saddle at any instant, the girl had reined up and dismounted.

She was breathing hard, her hair in disarry. Undoubtedly she had ridden all the way from Riobend this morning, despite Ralls' strict orders that she was to stay away from her father's ranch until the Probus manhunt was over.

As Hatfield skidded to a halt beside her, grim-faced with his anxiety for the girl's safety, he saw that Alva's attention was fixed on what appeared to be a pair of heavy plank doors set on a framework of some kind of dugout.

A shovel was sticking up from a pile of dirt near the doors. Hatfield saw now what Probus had been doing since his arrival here, shoveling away dirt which had spilled over the dugout entrance during his twenty years' absence. Without that delay, Hatfield knew Probus would probably be in Mexico by now.

"That's Probus' old wine cellar," Alva said. "I saw them both go inside, close the door behind them. They—"

Hatfield seized the young woman by one wrist and dragged her to one side, in case the two outlaws started shooting from their underground hideout. Not until they were safely out of the line of fire from the cellar did Alva speak again.

"I saw you and Ted under siege, through my father's field glasses from the other side of the gorge. Do you know who that hombre is with Duff Probus, Jim?"

Hatfield said, "I imagine he's John Cunkelman, one of Probus' old-time smuggling gang."

Alva shook her head. "No. It was Del Keefer—my dad's own cavvy-wrangler."

Del Keefer! The news came as no surprise to the Lone Wolf. Before he could say so, Ted Ralls came running over to join them.

CHAPTER IX

Manhunt Underground

ONE moment later Alva Ferris and the Riobend marshal were in each others' arms, oblivious to Jim Hatfield's

presence in the ecstasy of their reunion. The girl had run a terrible risk in driving Probus and Del Keefer away from the ridge crest. Hatfield believed she owed her life to the fact that Keefer was in love with the girl, and had probably refused to let Duff Probus open fire on her.

Hatfield moved away from the two lovers, keeping his strict attention on the door of the wine cellar through which the two outlaws had gone. They had their game trapped now. The easy thing to do would be to stand guard here until the bayed outlaws were forced to come out for food and water.

The Ranger heard Ted Ralls scolding his fiancée:

"You little fool, running this risk for us —how did you know Jim and I were in a tight spot? What are you doing out from town in the first place, honey?"

Alva's apology was pitched too low for Hatfield to hear. The Ranger made his way over to the young couple.

"This little scamp saved our bacon, Jim," the marshal grinned. "She ought to be horse-whipped, but I—"

Hatfield laughed, the tension slowly leaving his nerves.

"*'Sta nada,*" he said. "She's told you that the hombre who was siding Probus is Del Keefer?"

"Yeah," Ralls said, his bantering good humor leaving him at once. "I've got more motive than ever for wanting to nail Keefer's hide to a fence now. I'll bet he aimed to get me out of the way, hoping he could move in then and take over the Twin F."

Alva squeezed the marshal's hand. "Texas girls only love once," she reminded Ralls gently. "You're my man, Ted. Del wouldn't have had a chance, ever."

Hatfield said quickly, "I hate to break up this tender conversation, *amigos,* but we've got a pair of polecats treed and I could use some information. Either of you know anything about the layout of that wine cellar yonder?"

Ted Ralls replied instantly, "I've explored it dozens of times as a boy, Jim. It isn't a man-made cellar, even though Probus used it to store his big casks in, where it was cool the year 'round. It's really a cavern that Probus boarded over."

The Lone Wolf Ranger rubbed his jaw thoughtfully.

"A cavern?" he echoed. "Then there may be an exit from that wine cellar. Maybe Keefe and Probus aren't trapped without hope of escape, after all."

The Riobend lawman said doubtfully, "The grotto runs down at a forty-five degree angle, roughly, and it veers in an easterly direction under this hill, near as I can remember. Anyway, the far end of it connects with the Lost River tunnel."

Hatfield digested this information with a sinking sensation going through him. He knew from past experience that many of the hills here in the Texas Big Bend malpais were honeycombed with tunnels. Now that he had had time to think on it, it seemed obvious that Probus and Keefer would not have deliberately sought refuge in a hole in the ground from which there was no exit.

"I'll make you a bet," Alva Ferris said, "that Probus hid that Encinal Roundup loot somewhere in that wine cellar cave."

Hatfield turned to Ralls. "How long has it been since you explored it, Ted?"

"Oh, ten years, anyway. It was a favorite sport of youngsters my age, poking around in Probus' old cave looking for that treasure. I don't agree with Alva that the cache is in there. The grotto runs through solid limestone."

Hatfield's main interest was in finding out how this hillside wine cellar connected with Lost River's subterranean channel. Lost River, it was generally conceded, emptied into the Rio Grande, a few miles further south. Was it possible that Probus had an underground getaway to Mexico?

RALLS did not think so. He explained, "Lost River's tunnel is a big affair, Jim, maybe fifty feet from the water level to the roof of the cavern. This wine cellar burrow of Probus' opens on the river, but

a good forty feet, I'd say, above the water."

Jim Hatfield hitched his shell belts grimly. He had a feeling that while he wasted time conjecturing with these two, Probus and Keefer might be making their getaway to Mexico—and taking the two-hundred-thousand dollar loot with them.

"I'm going in there," the Ranger announced. "While I'm gone, Ted, I want you to stand watch. Even if you should hear shooting, don't come in."

Both Alva and the marshal were shocked by Hatfield's intention.

"It's dark as a coal mine in there, Jim," the girl protested. "They'd shoot you down the instant you opened those doors."

"You can't do it," Ralls bit out. "I won't let you."

But Jim Hatfield was already striding across the clearing toward the wine cellar doors, at an angle calculated to keep out of sight of the two outlaws in case they were waiting behind the heavy plank barrier.

When he came alongside the cellar door, Alva and young Ralls were close on his heels. They remained back to one side as Hatfield lay down on his stomach and wriggled along the cellar's threshold, putting an ear to the nearest crack in the doors.

He heard nothing except the very remote whisper of Lost River churning through its subterranean passage. He knew that the natural sounding board of the cavern would amplify any alien noises, such as the bated breathing of men waiting inside.

"Jim, come back!" Ralls called hoarsely, a note of desperation in his voice. "You can't stalk those two killers in the dark. That's exactly what they'd hope you'd do."

Hatfield propped himself up on one elbow and turned the full strike of his eyes on the young couple.

"You'd better send Alva back to town and tell her to stay there," the Lone Wolf said bluntly. "I'll want you to remain on guard here until I get back, Ted."

So saying, Hatfield got to his feet, drew his right hand Colt six-shooter, and with his left hand reached for the heavy hickory handle of the wine cellar door.

He pulled the door open suddenly, stepping back to keep out of sight. He was mildly surprised that Probus and Keefer had not barred the door from the inside. Perhaps that was impossible of achievement, since the cellar doors opened outward.

Pulling the door back against the hillside, the rusty iron hinges squalling their protest, Hatfield waited a few seconds, listening closely.

Then, knowing the next five seconds would be the most risky, he gripped the edge of the door and, using his arm as a pivot, swung himself through the cellar opening and plunged headlong into the darkness to one side.

No shots rang out. Daylight ran into the cavern for a good sixty feet before the cavern made a right-angle turn.

The floor of the cellar was littered with wine cask staves, which had probably been torn apart by treasure-seekers in years past. A musty, damp effluvium wafted past Hatfield's cheeks as he crouched in shadow, surveying the roundabout scene carefully.

The cellar roof was abristle with hanging stalactites, formed through millenniums of time by the seepage of calcium carbonate deposits from the limestone roof. Most of the matching stalagmites on the floor of the cavern had been broken asunder by the passage of many feet of cavern explorers.

The fore part of this grotto had been cleaned up by Probus when he had made his wine cellar here. The floor of the cavern was powdered limestone, and plain to read on its soft, yielding surface were the marks of two sets of high-heeled cowboots, where Probus and Del Keefer had made their way into the stygian depths of the cavern. The twin trails vanished beyond the dimly visible elbow turn of the grotto.

"Shut the door behind me," Hatfield called softly to the young couple waiting outside. He could not afford to be caught

silhouetted against the glare of Texas sunshine pouring through the hillside opening.

IN A few moments Ted Ralls had closed the door. The dank atmosphere, redolent with the musky odor of the thousands of bats which denned here, made its solid pressure against Hatfield's skin.

Outdoors, he could hear Ralls whispering to him, begging him to come back. But there was something Hatfield had to know: was there any way the fugitives could have lowered themselves into Lost River cavern and thus made good their escape?

Thumbing the knurled prong of his Colt hammer to full cock, Hatfield started off down the cavern floor. His spur rowels gave off a faint tinkle of sound, amplified a dozen fold by the confined atmosphere, impelling the Ranger to remove them before proceeding any further.

Yard by yard he groped his way along the moist limestone wall until he felt the ink-black passage make its turn to the left.

From here on, Hatfield knew he might stumble onto the hiding outlaws at any instant. The floor of the tunnel sloped sharply downward now, as Ralls had informed him. Ages past, this cavity in the earth had probably been level; then some upheavel of nature had raised the ridge and this hollow passage between the strata of limestone had been pitched up to follow the contour of the outer hillside.

The stalactites and stalagmites came closer together now, forcing the Lone Wolf to pick his way with infinite caution as he followed the roof-steep tilt of the passage.

He paused frequently to keen the darkness for any sign of the outlaws who had preceded him down this lightless cavern, but the noise of Lost River surging through its mysterious underground channel had become a relentless bass roar in his ears.

By the same token, that ceaseless drumming of angry waters would prevent Probus and Keefer from hearing their pursuer. Hatfield's boots made little sound on the ankle-deep guano which a million generations of bats had deposited in this cave. He could hear the squeakings of the little winged mice as his Stetson brushed their bodies, clinging to apertures in the roof.

Hatfield lost all sense of time and direction as he followed the twistings and turnings of the grotto downward. When the cave leveled off, he estimated that he had reached the flats directly under Probus' old winery and other ranch buildings.

It was possible that Probus might have an exit passage artificially bored through the earth to join up with this grotto. Hatfield dared not risk a match; a light would make him an easy target if the two outlaws were lurking anywhere in this musty, dripping-wet gloom.

Finally the roar of Lost River became so deafening that the Ranger dropped to all fours and began crawling through the mouldy stalagmites, damp to the touch. He could not risk plunging into space. Ralls had warned him that the other end of this tunnel was at least forty feet above the level of the river's waters.

Then, with an unexpectedness which made Hatfield's hair crawl on his scalp, he felt his left hand go out into nothingness. He halted, on his knees, exploring the drop-off with his free hand.

This was the cavern's dead end. He could feel the whirling mists of Lost River on his cheeks now. Forty feet down there were the whirling, angry waters of the river rushing toward their junction with the Rio Grande.

AFTER ten minutes' search of the precipitous rim, the Lone Wolf had failed to locate any type of man-made ladder, rope or otherwise, by which means Probus and his henchman could have lowered themselves into the Lost River opening.

He knew that Probus was too familiar with the underground maze beyond his wine cellar to have fallen accidentally to his doom at this jumping-off place.

"I've either passed them on the way

down," Hatfield reasoned to himself, "or they ducked into a side passage somewhere that I would need a lantern to discover. Any way I figure it, I'm wasting my time in this gopher burrow."

Taking his book of brown quirly papers from his shirt pocket, the Ranger twisted himself a makeshift candle, lighted it with a match from the hatband of his Stetson, and dropped the flaming taper over the brink.

He saw wind currents whip and whirl the blazing paper, as it floated downward into the awesome dark. But sparkling reflections on the spray-wet wall opposite revealed that Lost River's tunnel was at least fifty feet wide. Before the whirling mists extinguished his cigarette-paper taper, Hatfield had glimpsed the churning spouts of water where the river hit submerged ledges.

Hatfield turned and started to backtrack up the steep grotto, knowing that no man could have dived into the underground river and survived. Feeling his passage along the opposite wall to the one he had flanked coming down, Hatfield finally saw the bright Texas sunlight limned through cracks in the outer door.

Reaching it, he called out a warning, knowing that Ted Ralls would be in a hair-trigger state of suspense and might open fire on anyone who opened the plank doors.

As he slipped through the opening to face Ralls and Alva, both of them reacting as if they had never expected to see him return alive, the heat of the afternoon was in such violent contrast to the murky dampness of the cave that it made his senses reel.

"Find any traces of 'em?" the Riobend marshal asked tensely.

"No dice," Hatfield admitted. "I crawled down that slimy hole to the main river cavern without finding a trace of those skunks."

Ralls shoved his gun into holster with a grunt of despair.

"They made a clean getaway, I reckon," the marshal said.

[*Turn page*]

Jim Shoulders, World Champion All-Around Cowboy, 1949, wears and endorses Wranglers.
THE TOP COWBOYS WEAR
BLUE BELL
Wrangler
Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.
WESTERN JEANS

Many other Rodeo Cowboys Association champions wear Wranglers, including:

Todd Whatley, All-Around World Champion, 1947
Gerald Roberts, All-Around World Champ., 1948
Casey Tibbs, World Saddle Bronc Rid. Champ., '49
Bill Linderman, Runner-up World Champion, 1949

BLUE BELL WRANGLERS are tough and rugged. Made of heaviest 11-oz. Sanforized denim. Won't shrink out of fit. Styled by Rodeo Ben, custom tailor to top cowboys and ranchers. Men's and boys' sizes — **zipper or button front.** Women's Wranglers, 8 oz. wt., for trim figures, sizes 12 through 20. *Each* garment in Blue Bell's complete line of work and play clothes is guaranteed the best made, best fitting you can buy— *or your money back!*

BLUE BELL, Inc., Greensboro, N. C.
WORLD'S LARGEST PRODUCER OF WORK CLOTHES

Hatfield sat down in the shade of a tupelo bush and yanked up a tuft of dry grass to begin wiping the limestone mud and guano deposits off his cowboots.

"I disagree," the Ranger said. "I think they're still hiding underground. They'll have to come up for air sooner or later. We've got to be around when they do, Ted."

Ralls and the girl exchanged troubled glances. Noting this, Hatfield said quickly, "If you've had enough, Ted, I won't insist on keeping you here."

The Riobend lawman flushed. "It's not that, Jim," he said lamely. "The reason Alva rode out to the ranch this morning was to tell me that Fenn is to be buried at five o'clock today. She—she sort of hoped I could attend the services."

Hatfield answered, "I can savvy that. But I will be obliged if you'd return here after the funeral this evening, Ted. I'll need you to guard this wine cellar while I scout around hunting for possible exits where Probus and Keefer might have gone."

Alva leaned over to kiss Ralls on the cheek.

"You must stay here, Ted," she said humbly. "I'll ride back to town immediately. It's the only way out of this."

CHAPTER X

Secret Exit

HATFIELD had no way of knowing that Duff Probus and Del Keefer had already left their underground hideaway before the Ranger even entered the wine cellar.

Midway down the slope of the cavern, Probus' groping hands had encountered a rusty chain dangling down from the tunnel roof.

"We're at the bottom of a well I tried to dig so as to keep from having to tote my water up from the river gorge," Probus whispered to his confederate. "Instead of a water table I dug into this cave. All we got to do is climb this chain for twenty-odd feet and we'll be above ground again, alongside the winery."

As he had climbed up the rusty links, Del Keefer following close under his heels, the escaped convict was sorely tempted to put a bullet in the cavvy wrangler's skull. Keefer had outlived his usefulness. Then he recalled that he had but one load left in his Colt. With Jim Hatfield on the prowl, he might need that bullet for self-defense.

So Probus continued climbing, bracing his boot toes on the hewn rock wall of the yard-square well shaft. Keefer, grunting with the effort of lifting himself hand-over-hand up the chain, had no inkling of how close he had been to a double-cross.

Reaching the ground level, Probus' shaven skull bumped against a covering of rotten planks which he had left over the dry well. Clinging to the chain with his left hand, his legs braced against the rock wall, the convict thrust his right forearm against the wooden lid and moved it to one side.

Blinding sunlight struck him in the face, the hot pressure of it feeling welcome on his chilled flesh. A moment later he was scrambling out on dry ground, amid waist-deep ignota brush. Directly alongside the well opening was the south wall of the adobe winery where he and Keefer had hoped to gun down the two lawmen, prior to Alva Ferris' unexpected arrival on their flank.

Alva would never know how close Probus had come to gunning her from saddle. He had held his fire at Keefer's insistence. The Twin F cavvy wrangler still had hopes of marrying the girl.

As Probus stood waiting for Keefer to emerge from the well, he heard the whicker of a horse inside the winery, and was reminded that Ralls and Jim Hatfield had left their mounts inside the shelter of the crumbled walls.

A sudden thought struck Probus. Hatfield's saddle bags would, in all likelihood, contain a supply of extra .45-caliber ammunition. If he could refill his six-gun's

empty chambers and the belt loops of his gun harness, he would be in a position to get rid of Del Keefer when the opportunity offered itself. Why share the loot he had waited twenty years to regain?

Rounding the corner of the abandoned winery, Probus made certain that Ted Ralls was no longer here. The Riobend marshal would have joined Hatfield over by the wine cellar entrance on the opposite side of the ridge by now. Probus chuckled with a satanic amusement as he visualized the two lawmen and Alva Ferris maintaining a day-and-night vigil there, believing they had their quarry trapped.

Del Keefer was clambering out of the well opening now. Probus called in a low voice, "Better haul up that chain, Del, just in case they make a search down in that cavern."

The Twin F waddy began dragging the chain out of the well as Probus climbed through a break in the *vinateria* wall and made his way over to where the lawmen's two horses were waiting.

Hatfield's golden sorrel flattened its ears and showed its teeth as Probus approached. Obviously, the Ranger's horse was a one-master animal who would tolerate no snooping around.

Young Ralls' pony, however, showed no signs of hostility as Probus came up to it and unbuckled the marshal's saddle pouch.

LUCK was with him. Among the miscellaneous items in Ralls' alforja bag was a nearly-full box of .45 ammunition.

Probus jacked open his gun and was ejecting empties from the cylinder preparatory to reloading, when Del Keefer came into the winery, his face bleak with the strain of the past hour. There was something else in Keefer's eyes: a bright, calculating suspicion.

Then, without warning, Keefer jerked a Peacemaker .44 from holster and trained it on the shaven-skulled convict.

Probus stiffened. Caught with his own weapon momentarily useless, he was at Keefer's mercy.

"What's the idea?" Probus demanded angrily.

Del Keefer stalked forward, thumb cocking his gunhammer.

"I don't trust you," the wrangler growled. "I want to know where that treasure is stashed. I got a hunch it's down in that cavern we just left. Otherwise you wouldn't have spent so many hours shovelin' dirt away from them cellar doors."

Probus grinned. He had overplayed his hand, trusting Keefer as long as he had. The wrangler was perfectly correct in his assumption of a double-cross. That made him dangerous.

"Don't be a fool," Probus snapped. "We're going to organize the old border-hopping bunch, ain't we? With you my *segundo*. Remember the dinero we used to make, smuggling dope, 'dobe dollars, alien Chinese, wetback cattle across the Rio?"

Probus reached out and jerked the gun from Probus' hand.

"Just the same, I'm riding herd on you from here on out," Keefer snarled. "You killed the best friend you had over at the pen, didn't you? If you'd do that, you'd double-cross me. I still think you deliberately left Marfa to be killed last night. You don't get your gun back till I see that Encinal dinero."

Probus' heavy shoulders lifted and fell in a sort of a shrug.

"I wouldn't sell you down the river," he whispered. "We got to get out of here. We can argue this out later."

Keefer continued to hold his gun on the convict as he said, "Where we going now?"

"Down into Lost River gorge, I reckon. The only way to get to my cache is through that wine-cellar—or down the well again. That cave leads to Lost River. We'll need a lass'-rope to get down to the cache."

Keefer said truculently, not believing any of this, "In other words we got to hide out until Hatfield and Ralls have left this side of the river?"

Probus was already heading out of the

winery, Keefer wheeling to follow him.

"That's how it stacks up," Probus whined. "If we'd had a lariat with us we could have reached the cache by now. As it is, them star-packers—"

Keefer cut in sharply, "You realize I could put a slug in your noggin and tell Hatfield and Ralls I captured you making a getaway, Duff?"

They were hurrying across the open flats toward Probus' tumble-down barn and ranch house now. Probus glanced over his shoulder at the cowpuncher and reminded him caustically, "Yeah? You forget Alva Ferris got a good look at you, Keefer. She knows who's backing me now. So do Ralls and that Texas Ranger."

Keefer remained silent as they reached the barn. He had overlooked the fact that Alva had seen him taking flight with Probus. During the excitement of their flight through the cavern, Keefer had not had time to realize that his dreams of marriage with Alva Ferris had gone glimmering now. What it boiled down to was the simple fact that Keefer was as much a fugitive from justice as Duff Probus. The law knew he was John Cunkelman now.

THE convict seemed to read Keefer's thoughts, for he said now, "String along with me and forget that double-cross talk, Del, and we'll split that Encinal Roundup money between us and head for Chihuahua. On a hundred thousand apiece we could live like kings in Mexico. If you gun me down, you won't find that cache in a thousand years."

Entering the barn, Duff Probus located a coil of time-stiffened rawhide reata in a pile of debris behind a manger. Slinging the lass'-rope over one shoulder, Probus now headed out of the barn, Keefer trailing him, gun still palmed.

"Where we going?" Keefer wanted to know. His voice had lost some of its hostility now. Probus breathed easier, knowing he had won his point.

"Down into Lost River Gorge," Probus said. "By the side gulch trail I used for fetching water up to the ranch."

Keefer put his gun back in leather and followed Probus in sullen silence as the Santa Casita convict led him toward the rimrock of the deep Lost River canyon. A side defile, overgrown with brush after twenty years, was Probus' destination.

Reaching the defile and heading into the jungle of weeds and cactus and juniper growth, both fugitives heard a rumble of hoofbeats behind them.

From the shelter of the brush they turned to look back toward the ranch grounds.

Alva Ferris was putting her horse down the vineyard slope. There was no sign of Ralls or the Texas Ranger.

Entering the ranch grounds, the daughter of old Fenn Ferris headed straight toward the trail which led to the Lost River bridge. That trail would lead Alva within a few yards of the spot where Probus and Keefer were hiding.

"Hatfield has sent the girl back for reinforcements," Duff Probus growled. "Before sunset she'll have the rest of Ferris' crew over here."

Keefer was trembling with suspense as he saw Alva Ferris cantering toward them along the rimrock trail. There was still no sign of the two lawmen she had left on the far side of the vineyard ridge.

Keefer turned suddenly to snatch the rawhide lariat Probus was carrying.

"What you aim to do?" Probus demanded warily.

Keefer shook out a loop, his eye on the oncoming girl.

"I don't aim to let Alva spread the word that I'm an owlhooter, Duff," the Twin F Connected cavvy wrangler said in a lethal monotone. "If I can put her and Ralls and Hatfield out of the way, I can stay in Texas."

Probus' eyes glittered dangerously. Women were bad luck. What Keefer was about to do was contrary to every instinct Probus owned.

"Come back, you loco *cabrone!*" Probus pleaded. "Once we're down in the gorge we're safe. If the girl doesn't come back on schedule Hatfield and that marshal will—"

But the time to argue with Del Keefer was past. The cowhand was already plowing his way back through the brush toward the trail along which Alva Ferris was riding.

A moment later the girl's strawberry roan was alongside the mouth of the brush-choked defile leading into the gorge.

Stepping into the open, Del Keefer made his cast. He did not aim for the girl. The rawhide noose snared the roan's right forefoot and in the next instant the pony went down.

Instinct made Alva Ferris kick her boots out of stirrups as she felt herself being hurled from saddle. She gave vent to a piercing scream of horror as she cartwheeled through space, the scream pinched off as she landed heavily on the flinty earth a dozen feet from the fallen roan.

WITH a spiderlike quickness Del Keefer pounced forward, jerking a Bowie knife from his belt sheath as he came alongside the fallen girl.

It was his intention to drive the steel blade into Alva's back as she lay prone before him, to seal her lips forever.

Then, realizing that the tumble had knocked Alva cold, Keefer paused.

"She'd marry me," ran the thought through his brain, "to save her life."

Alva's roan had regained its feet now. Keefer snatched up the lasso and followed it up to release the noose from the pony's foreleg. Thus freed, the Twin F Connected roan stampeded off across the sage flats, stirrup leathers flapping.

Casting a quick look in the direction of the vineyard hill, knowing that the girl's frantic scream might have reached the ears of Hatfield and Ralls, Del Keefer lifted Alva's insensible body in his arms and slogged back out of sight in the brushy covert of the side gulch.

Keefer silenced Probus' shocked protest. "I'm taking Alva with us wherever we're going, Duff! As long as we got her for a hostage, them John Laws can't do anything to us. You lead the way."

Blood was seeping from a welt on the girl's scalp and she moaned softly in Keefer's arms as the cavvy wrangler scrambled down the overgrown trail following Probus.

It was semi-dark down here as the high rock walls cut off the sun. The tangled vegetation thinned out as they neared the base of the gorge, revealing the old mule trail Probus had blazed for transporting water barrels up from the river.

Alva Ferris was regaining her stunned senses as they reached the sand spit alongside the raging torrent of Lost River. Two hundred yards downstream the gorge made a bend, with a stand of dwarf willow and cottonwoods growing on the outjutting promontory there.

Beyond that bend, Keefer knew, Lost River plunged underground on its way to the Rio Grande.

Reaching the water's edge, Duff Probus turned downstream. A few yards away, an ancient dugout canoe lay amid a screen of tules.

"Old Injun boat that drifted down-river one spring," Probus said. "I hauled it in. We'll use it to float down to those cottonwoods yonder."

Keefer laid the girl's stirring body down on the sandy river bank and stared at his outlaw partner as if he doubted Probus' sanity.

"Put a boat into Lost River?" Keefer protested. "What you tryin' to do—kill the three of us?"

Probus was already shoving the prow of the dugout into the lapping yellow waters of the river.

"You darn ignoramus," the convict yelled back, "Hatfield is sure to trail us down here. Once we make it to them trees we'll be safe. We can get back out of the gorge from there."

Keefer picked up Alva Ferris' limp bulk and walked along the sand spit toward the waiting canoe, his spike-heeled cowboots leaving deep prints along the way.

Probus had already climbed into the prow of the boat and had picked up a sun-warped paddle. Keefer laid the girl out on the rough-hewn bottom of the dugout,

his twisted face showing his misgivings. Unable to swim, he had a typical cowpuncher's dread of deep water. Yet Probus must have some getaway plan in mind.

Only the fact that Hatfield and the marshal would inevitably trace them down this gulch from Probus' ranch impelled Keefer to shove the stern of the Indian craft out into the current and leap aboard. Probus must know what he was doing. Otherwise, the convict was deliberately leading them all to their doom.

The raging current of Lost River seized the hollowed-out log. Duff Probus, manning his paddle with desperate strength, forced it close inshore, knowing that to be drawn into the main channel would suck them into Lost River's underground course from which no living thing could possibly emerge alive.

With incredible speed, the millrace waters swept the canoe downstream, Probus' paddle digging deep to keep it on course. Seconds later, it seemed to Keefer, the prow of the dugout gouged into the willowbrake and cottonwood where the river made its last bend short of going underground.

Keefer scrambled out into knee-deep water, pulling Alva out of the canoe. Probus, puffing with exertion, followed suit.

"We'll drag this boat into the tules out of sight," the convict said. "Soon as it gets dark we can leave the gorge. You got my solemn oath, Keefer, to have your share of the cache before tomorrow morning."

"I'll make sure of that," Keefer retorted malevolently.

CHAPTER XI

Kidnapers' Trail

LONE Ranger Jim Hatfield was topping the ridge overlooking Duff Probus' ranch grounds when his ears caught the pinched-off scream of horror from Alva Ferris.

It had been his intention to scout the entire length of this ridge thoroughly while daylight held, to see if he could locate a possible exit from the wine cellar cavern.

Now, hearing that terror-ridden scream dying in echo on the sweltering afternoon air, the Lone Wolf Ranger believed that he was too late. That scream could only mean that Alva, heading for Riobend for her father's funeral, had run afoul of the missing outlaws.

Raking the roundabout landscape with slitted eyes, Hatfield caught sight of a blur of movement down by the west rimrock of Lost River gorge.

An intervening cottonwood tree cut off his view, but from behind that cottonwood raced an empty-saddled horse—Alva's strawberry roan.

Something akin to relief flooded through the Texas Ranger. Alva's horse had probably stepped into a prairie dog hole and thrown her. That would account for the scream, and the sight of her runaway pony.

Hatfield turned to see Marshal Ted Ralls slogging up the rear slope of the hill from the wine cellar doors. He had heard his fiancée's scream, even at that distance, so far did sound carry in these empty hills. Now, oblivious to the fact that Hatfield had left orders for him to maintain a watch on the plank doors which hid the mystery of the two outlaws' disappearance, he was coming to investigate.

Hatfield waited on the hilltop, keeping an eye on Alva's roan until it disappeared in the direction of the Lost River bridge. The animal was returning to its home stable at Twin F Connected across the gorge.

When Ralls reached the crest of this ridge, wild-eyed with concern, the Ranger quieted his fears with a terse order:

"Alva's hoss threw her down on the rimrock trail, Ted. I'll wait here while you go down and see how she is."

The ghost of a grin touched the redheaded lawman's mouth.

"When I heard her holler I was afraid

maybe she'd tangled with those owlhooters," the marshal confessed. "I—I realize I shouldn't have left that wine cellar unguarded."

Hatfield waved off the young lawman's apologies.

"I'll stay here within gun range of that cave," he said. "You hike down there and help Alva."

Ralls grinned his thanks and began his descent of the vineyard slope. Hatfield sought out a shady spot and hunkered down, building a smoke. He kept his attention focussed on the wine cellar doors downhill, knowing that if Probus and Keefer were inside the cavern, they might attempt an escape if they knew the doors were left unguarded.

He had his cigarette going and was enjoying his opportunity for a rest when he was startled by the roar of a gunshot, off beyond Probus' barn in the direction of Lost River's rimrock.

Hatfield jumped to his feet and ran along the ridge to a position where he could look down across the ranch grounds.

In the distance, almost at the brink of Lost River gorge, he saw Ted Ralls waving his hat frantically, sunlight flashing off the gun in the marshal's hand. The shot, then, had been fired to get Hatfield's attention.

Hatfield's mouth compressed grimly as he saw Ralls' frantic gesticulations. He noted that the marshal was standing just out of line of the cottonwood tree in Probus' yard.

"He must have found Alva badly injured," was the Ranger's first thought.

AT ANY rate, it was obvious that Ralls wanted him to come at once. With a last reluctant glance in the direction of the wine cellar doors, Hatfield waved an answering signal to the distracted marshal down by the river gorge and started on his way down the east flank of the ridge.

Reaching the old winery, the Ranger went inside to pick up the horses. If Alva was in need of medical attention, they would have to rush her to Riobend on horseback.

Leading the horses out of the adobe ruins, Hatfield mounted Goldy and, leading Ralls' horse, spurred into a gallop which took him across Probus' ranch grounds and out to the rimrock trail.

Dismay touched Hatfield as, coming in full view of the Lost River gorge, he saw no sign of Alva Ferris. Only Ted Ralls, pacing in circles around the spot from which he had seen the girl's strawberry roan pony stampeding.

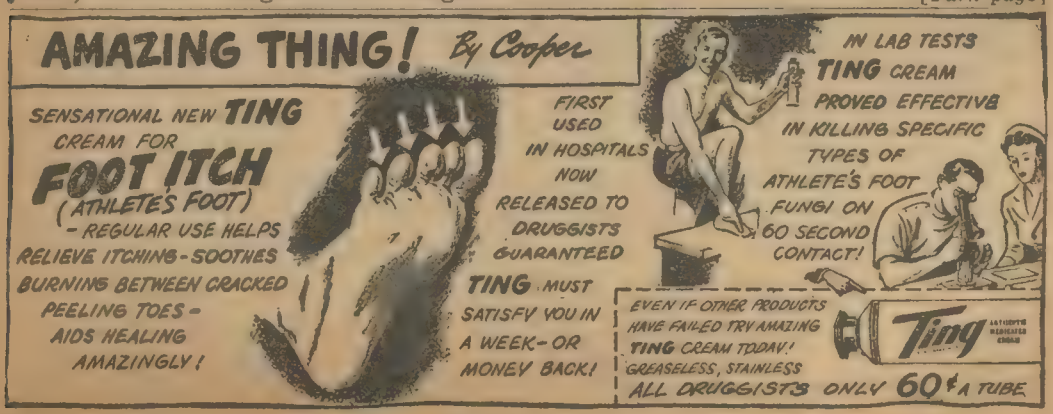
Reining up alongside Ralls, Hatfield inquired sharply, "What's wrong? Where's Alva?"

Ralls pointed, mute with grief, at a tangle of hoofprints and other marks on the sandy soil.

Dismounting, the Lone Wolf Ranger stared at the story which he saw in the dust of the trail.

A man wearing cowboots had walked around a spot where Alva Ferris' horse had gone down. There was a smear of blood glistening on a knob of rock, and the clear impression of a pair of small hands

[Turn page]


AMAZING THING! By Cooper
SENSATIONAL NEW TING CREAM FOR FOOT ITCH (ATHLETE'S FOOT)
- REGULAR USE HELPS RELIEVE ITCHING - SOOTHES BURNING BETWEEN CRACKED PEELING TOES - AIDS HEALING AMAZINGLY!
FIRST USED IN HOSPITALS NOW RELEASED TO DRUGGISTS GUARANTEED
TING MUST SATISFY YOU IN A WEEK - OR MONEY BACK!
IN LAB TESTS TING CREAM PROVED EFFECTIVE IN KILLING SPECIFIC TYPES OF ATHLETE'S FOOT FUNGI ON 60 SECOND CONTACT!
EVEN IF OTHER PRODUCTS HAVE FAILED TRY AMAZING TING CREAM TODAY! GREASELESS, STAINLESS
ALL DRUGGISTS ONLY 60¢ A TUBE
Ting

—Alva's hands, unquestionably—pressed into the sand.

"Alva's been kidnaped, Jim!" Ralls finally put voice to his mental torment. "See the mark where a lass'-rope lay in the sand there? Her hoss was tripped from under her. You can see where she landed, plain as print. She must have bashed her head on that rock."

Hatfield felt the acid taste of despair on his tongue as he made a quick, professionally precise study of the roundabout marks.

It was as Ralls had already deduced. Here was where the pony had fallen; there, a few feet away, were the marks where its rider had been thrown.

The boot marks came onto the scene from an angle, and there were another set of tracks, deep ones, leading back toward the same direction—toward Lost River gorge.

"Whoever roped the horse carried Alva," Hatfield said. "Come on. The sign's fresh. That cottonwood at the corner of the corral kept me from seeing this happen from the ridge."

Ralls matched Hatfield's stride as the Ranger headed off along the row of deep boot prints. Scuff marks in the sand told Hatfield's trained eye that the kidnaper had dragged a lariat behind him—the same rope with which he had snared Alva's pony as she rode up the rimrock trail.

The boot marks led into the brush-choked mouth of a narrow gulch which broke the west wall of Lost River gorge. Reaching the head of the gulch, Hatfield discovered something else. Two sets of boot tracks, leading into the gulch from the direction of Probus' ranch house.

Hatfield knelt to study those tracks, and a taut expression came to his face as he looked up into Ted Ralls' anguished eyes.

"Marshal," the Lone Wolf Ranger said huskily, "I hate to break this news . . . but those boots belong to Probus and Keefer. These prints match the ones those owlhooters made when they entered the wine cellar. One has a patch on the right sole. The other has a spur rowel that drags the dust."

Ralls' face went ashen. "You mean—those rannihans got out of that wine cellar unbeknownst to us?"

HATFIELD got to his feet, nodding gravely.

"It's obvious Probus knew some method of getting out of that hole," he said. "If we had time to back-track them we'd see where they hit daylight again. The thing is, they were hiding in this brush when Alva rode by."

Ralls dragged a shaking arm across his face.

"They've kidnaped her as a hostage," whispered the Riobend marshal. "Or maybe Keefe thinks he can force Alva to marry him to save her life."

Hatfield drew a six-gun, twirled the cylinder, and started walking in the direction of the brushy defile.

"This gulch leads to the river down there, most likely," the Ranger said. "They can't have taken your fiancée very far, Ted. We've got to trail them."

Ralls came plowing through the whippy foliage behind Hatfield as they started down the defile. Hatfield knew the danger of walking into the blazing guns of the kidnapers, but he knew he could not talk young Ralls out of making this trek with him.

"Listen, Ted," the Ranger said grimly, as they burrowed through the entangling brush. "We're sure to find Probus and Keefer waiting down by the river. As long as they hold Alva captive, they hold aces to our deuces. Chances are we'll have to make a bargain with those buscaderos."

Ralls, his face bleeding from a dozen scratches where he had plowed through barriers of prickly pear cactus, nodded his understanding of the desperate situation which was shaping up for them.

"I know," he said in a dull voice. "They will want their freedom in return for Alva's life. We've got to grant them whatever terms they ask, Jim."

Hatfield made no reply. He knew Ralls had the only answer. By kidnaping the marshal's fiancée, the outlaws had every-

thing in their favor. Hatfield also knew that Probus would gun them down from ambush if the situation was right.

After they had descended two hundred feet from the rimrock level the brushy growth died out and they found themselves staring down a tight corridor of jagged rock toward the flowing, silt-yellowed surface of Lost River.

There was no sign of Alva and her kidnapers down on the narrow ribbon of sand at the river's edge. They could only be waiting off to one side.

This was the roughtest kind of a gun-trap to buck. Jim Hatfield halted, believing they would have to proceed only after making some kind of plan.

But young Ralls was not to be stopped. Brushing past the Ranger, the Riobend marshal started racing down the steep trail, boots ringing on the rocks, his headlong flight kicking up a small avalanche of rubble to advertise his approach to the gunmen who Hatfield was positive must be waiting just around the corner of the defile.

The Ranger called out a warning, but Ralls did not appear to have heard his cry. A moment later the marshal skidded to a halt at the edge of Lost River, head swiveling as he stared wildly to right and left.

Hatfield was making his cautious approach to the gorge bottom when Ralls shouted to him above the thunder of the racing waters, "They ain't in sight, Jim."

The Ranger turned his attention now to the tracks the kidnapers had made in reaching the water's edge. Coming out onto the sandspit where Ralls was waiting, he saw the imprint of Alva's body where she had been laid down on the wet sand. The boot tracks of the two outlaws led off to the right, down-stream.

HATFIELD was utterly bewildered. It seemed that Alva's kidnapers had vanished without trace. This sandy beach beside Lost River's surging waters was only a few yards wide. Upstream it pinched out against a rocky outthrust where eddying waters beat like ocean surf. Downstream, the sand spit ended in a bristle of tule growth.

Ted Ralls, picking up the outlaws' tracks, headed toward that tule hedge. Then he halted, staring at a long oval depression where something had rested in the tules.

As Hatfield came up alongside the Riobend marshal, he recognized that elongated oblong shape at once for what it was. A crude canoe or other kind of boat had lain here for years in the tules, and the growth of river grasses still held the shape of the boat.

"Looks like they got away on a boat of some kind," Jim Hatfield shouted in Ralls' ear. "I thought Lost River was impossible to maneuver a boat in?"

Ralls turned a panic-stricken glance toward the big Ranger at his side.

"That's true," Ralls said in an anguished voice. "Look at that current, all those jagged rocks. No man living could negotiate this river in a boat."

Hatfield turned his gaze downstream toward the jutting promontory covered with green cottonwood and willow brake. Beyond those trees, out of their view from this angle, he knew the river made its entry underground.

"I know the boat they used for their getaway," Ralls went on. "An old Indian dugout that Probus must have fished out of the river during a drought years back. I've seen it drawn up in the tules here."

Hatfield's roving eye picked up a detail neither of them had noticed before. Something resembling a long, tenuous snake lay half-hidden in the tules near the spot where the outlaws had shoved the dugout into the river.

"A rawhide lass'-rope, Ted!" Hatfield cried, walking over and picking up the coil. "This is probably the rope they used to drop Alva's pony up there on the rimrock."

Ralls staggered over to a boulder and sat down, burying his face in his hands, his shoulders shaken by silent sobs. The sight of a strong man weeping put a flush of embarrassment on the Texas Ranger,

and he turned away, leaving Ralls alone with his grief.

When the Riobend marshal finally got himself under control, it was to see Jim Hatfield struggling to drag a splintered driftlog out of the further tules. The Ranger had looped the coiled rawhide rope over one shoulder.

Ralls jumped up and headed over to where Hatfield was toiling to roll the bleached driftlog over to the river's edge.

"Hey, what are you thinking of, Jim?" Ralls cried out, aghast.

The Lone Wolf Ranger's ruggedly handsome face was taut with strain as he faced the marshal.

"If Probus could make his getaway by the river, knowing the river as well as he does," Hatfield shouted over the pounding waters, "then there's no reason why I can't follow on this log. At least as far as those cottonwoods yonder."

Ralls grabbed Hatfield by the arm, his eyes wild.

"You can't risk yourself like that," the young lawman cried. "I know Alva's dead. Probus and Keefer were desperate enough to commit suicide. No man can survive Lost River. I've had that drummed into me ever since I was a kid and wanted to go swimming further up the gorge."

HATFIELD stooped and, gripping a broken snag, rolled the log out into the river. Holding a foot on the grounded butt of the driftwood to keep the current from snatching it away, he turned back to face Ted Ralls.

"I think Probus knew what he was doing," Hatfield said grimly. "He lived beside this river a long time. Maybe he knows it's possible to ride Lost River all the way to the Rio Grande."

Ralls splashed out into ankle-deep water as he saw Jim Hatfield preparing to straddle the log.

"I'll go with you, then!" the Riobend marshal insisted. "It's my girl who's lost somewhere down-river."

Hatfield reached out to shove Ralls away from the log.

"I'm not foolhardy," he said angrily. "I'll ride this log only as far as those cottonwoods yonder. If I can locate signs that Probus went ashore, and if I overtake him, I'll bargain for Alva's life. Otherwise I can return here, using this lariat as an anchor from rock to rock along the bank."

Ralls took a step forward. His jaw was set adamantly.

"I'll go with you," he insisted. "I—"

Ralls didn't see Hatfield's fist coming. The Ranger's powerful uppercut exploded on the young marshal's jaw and knocked him backwards into the tules.

"Sorry, Ted, but I'm lone-wolfing this," Hatfield's voice filtered through Ralls' spinning senses. "You stay hitched till I get back. With luck I'll have Alva with me."

Ralls shook his head to clear it and came to his knees. His face had gone ragwhite, against which the freckles stood out like flakes of tobacco. He was helpless to intervene as the Lone Wolf Ranger pushed his driftlog out into the water and leaped aboard.

Despair was in Ted Ralls as he saw the rushing waters seize the big log and whip it downstream. He saw Jim Hatfield's big shape sway expertly to maintain his balance, bronzed hands clutching the shattered stubs of tree limbs for support.

Hatfield's fate was in the river's hands now. The current caught the log and swept it along at terrifying speed.

"He's lost," Ralls groaned. "He'll be sucked underground just like Alva and those outlaws were. Jim's uselessly sacrificing himself."

CHAPTER XII

Lost River Victim

BEWILDERED, Alva Ferris blinked her eyes open. She found herself lying on her back, staring straight upward at the ribbon of blue Texas sky framed by Lost River's overhanging cliffs.

Her head was splitting with pain and she felt the adhesive texture of dried blood along her temple and cheek. Her sore ankle throbbed like a bad tooth under the tight bandages Doctor Atsatt had placed there yesterday afternoon.

The roar of Lost River was in her ears. She propped herself up on one elbow and stared dazedly about, then recoiled in horror as she saw the vast opening of Lost River's cavern at the base of the blind canyon wall not a hundred yards away.

The cliffs narrowed here, speeding up the river's flow as it funneled into its subterranean passage. Sunlight sparkled on the oily, tortured waters. A muffled roar seemed to come from the maw of that cavern as the flood spilled underground.

Then a man's shadow fell across Alva's body and she jerked herself around to see a pair of mud-spattered Coffeyville boots wide-spread in the grass beside her. Her gaze ran up a pair of saddle-warped legs, over a barrel-shaped torse and came to rest on the ruddy face of her father's cavvy wrangler, Del Keefer.

Sight of Keefer's leering eyes snapped the girl back to reality. Her last coherent memory had been of being thrown from her horse up on the rimrock trail, on her way to Riobend and her father's funeral. How she had reached the pit of the gorge was beyond her immediate comprehension.

Del Keefer squatted down beside the girl and attempted to place a hand on her shoulder. Alva recoiled from his touch as if he had been a scaly reptile.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed. "I know you're with Duff Probus. You tried to kill my fiance and Jim Hatfield. You're an outlaw, Del Keefer!"

Keefer's eyes took on a stormy glint of anger.

"That ain't any way for you to be talkin' under the circumstances, Alva," he said unctuously. "Whether you live or die depends on me, sweetheart. You *sabe* that?"

Alva got unsteadily to her feet, looking around wildly as if seeking some place to run. But this promontory crowded hard between cliff and river offered no refuge. It was thickly overgrown with scrub willow and salt cedar and cottonwoods. There was a break in the cliff wall which seemed to offer a means of escaping the gorge proper, but Del Keefer blocked her way in that direction.

A few yards along the river bank, crouched among the tules at the water's edge, she saw the shaven-headed figure of Duff Probus, her father's killer. The convict's attention was fixed up-river.

Keefer's wheedling voice broke into the panicked run of her thoughts: "You know I've loved you a long time, Alva. All you got to do is promise to marry me and I won't lift a finger to harm you."

Alva turned back to face the leering cavvy man. During the years Keefer had worked on Twin F Connected's payroll, she had loathed this waddy, scorned his crude attempts to pay court to her. But Keefer was a top hand at breaking

[*Turn page*]

60 Proof—Mr. Boston Distiller Inc., Boston, Massachusetts

wild horses, and as such Fenn Ferris had needed his services. For her father's peace of mind, Alva had never told Fenn about Keefer's advances in the past.

"Marry you?" shrilled the girl. "Why, you—you pig! You mangy excuse for a man! I'd throw myself in the river first. You filthy, stupid *pelado!*"

KEEFER winced under Alva's tongue lashing and all the cruel venom of the man's nature came to the surface. Curbing his murderous temper with a visible effort, his eyes took on a lascivious hunger as he appraised this girl's supple body.

"I know what's the matter, Alva," the wrangler commented. "You think I'm an ordinary uncurried forty-a-month bronc topper. Not good enough for you. Well, in a few hours from now I'll be a rich man, you hear? Rich enough to buy and sell Twin F a dozen times. You'd live like a queen married to me, Alva. You got everything to gain, including your life."

Whatever the girl's reply would have been was interrupted by a hoarse shout from Duff Probus, over by the river bank.

"That Hatfield Ranger is ridin' a log down-river, Del! In the name of tarnation give me a gun!"

Keefer seemed to forget Alva Ferris' existence as he raced over to join his outlaw partner. The girl staggered in that direction, to a point where she could get a view up the Lost River gorge.

Pure despair lanced through Alva as she recognized the rugged figure of Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield rapidly approaching this out-thrust of land, riding astraddle a weather-bleached fragment of driftlog.

Probus and Keefer dropped belly-down in the tules as they saw Jim Hatfield shaking out the loop of a rawhide lariat he carried. As the floating log shot past the cottonwooded headland, the Lone Wolf made his expert cast and the leather noose settled over an old stump on the riverbank not five feet from where the two outlaws lay in hiding.

Alva tried to scream a warning as she saw Hatfield take a couple of quick dallies around a protruding snag of the log, but the roar of the river wiped out her cry.

The rawhide rope snapped taut as a fiddle string and Hatfield's driftlog swung around in a tight arc before the thrust of the current, putting his back to the foaming black maw of the subterranean opening down-river.

At the moment the Ranger was hard put to keep astride the log as it whipped and rolled at the end of the lass'-rope. It was obviously the Ranger's intention to let the current swing him around to shore where he could make a landing. Alva Ferris was a petrified spectator to what happened next. She saw the astonishment and concern on the Lone Wolf's handsome face as he caught sight of her standing in the deep shade of the cottonwoods; an instant later Hatfield had both six-guns out of leather, his eyes sweeping the promontory for a glimpse of the two outlaws.

Alva heard Probus' muffled shout: "Give me a gun, Del! I'll punch that star-toter's clock for him—pay him back for winging me yesterday morning."

Del Keefer's savage voice barely reached the girl's ears:

"There's a better way of cashing in that Ranger's chips than swappin' lead with the son. Watch me, Duff!"

Alva staggered forward as she saw Keefer wriggling his way toward the stump which Hatfield had lassoed, keeping the bulk of the stump between him and the Ranger's guns. Out on the log, forty feet from dry land, Hatfield realized that a side eddy was keeping him from getting nearer solid ground.

A knife gleamed in Keefer's fist as he reached up to make a single slashing cut at the rawhide reata which girdled the tree trunk.

The rope snapped like a string. The sudden release of the rope made Hatfield's driftlog buck like a horse. Alva's scream went unnoticed below the river's stentorian voice as she saw the Ranger fight for balance, losing his grasp on one six-gun as he grasped a jutting stub of limb to keep from falling into the river.

THE log spun madly in a tight whirlpool just outside the main current. Hatfield's face was a blur as he clung doggedly to the log, his legs losing their grip as he plunged out of sight under the muddy river.

Now the main current seized the log. Alva Ferris saw Jim Hatfield's head and shoulders break the surface in a smother of foam. He was a dozen feet away from the log now, his body entangled in the trailing rope which he had dallied to the log.

Probus and Keefer jumped to their feet and ran along the water's edge, whooping in triumph as they saw Hatfield being borne inexorably into the funneling millrace of pounding waters sluicing into the cavern.

Alva got the briefest of glimpses of Jim Hatfield's bobbing head as, helpless as a chip in a maelstrom, he was swept into the black maw of doom where Lost River went underground.

She was still staring at the cavern mouth where Hatfield had been swept out of sight when Del Keefer cut into her range of vision. The cavvy wrangler's visage was twisted into a mask of menace as he headed toward her.

"All right, my high-speerited little filly!" Keefer bawled above the river's deafening basso profundo roar. "Hatfield is catfish bait now. You willing to be my wife, or do you want to be picked up in the Rio Grande a few weeks from now, the same as that Ranger *amigo* of yours?"

Alva drew back her hand and slapped Keefer across the face with all her strength. She spun, hoping to run for the cleft in the cliff wall which promised the only possible chance of escape from this nightmarish trap, only to feel Keefer's great hands clamp about her waist.

Struggling impotently, the girl wrestled with the big buckaroo. He was dragging her toward the river, and she knew what his purpose was. Death or surrender!

Kicking, biting, resisting the big man's hugging arms with all the strength she possessed, Alva Ferris never had a chance. She saw Duff Probus grinning in the background as Keefer dragged her across the muddy rim of the bank into knee-deep water.

Then, whirling his body like a discus thrower, the Twin F cavvy wrangler hurled Alva's body out into the raging current.

She went under, holding her breath by instinct. She felt the invincible power of Lost River's cross currents buffeting her along the rocky bottom.

Her lungs were exploding as she came to the surface, to see the maw of the subterranean channel sweeping toward her at express-train speed.

The primal instinct of self-preservation made the girl start swimming, knowing the futility of fighting her way to safety. She was in mid-river, caught in the funneling sweep of angry waters now.

Then she was caught in a tight whirlpool off to one side of the cavern entrance. As she spun in that tightening circle, dizzy with the speed of it, she caught kaleidoscopic glimpses of the interior of the tunnel mouth. And her eyes beheld a sight which her reason would not allow her to accept as truth.

Jim Hatfield was climbing out of the river's grasp onto a rocky ledge, just inside the reach of daylight fifty feet beyond the tunnel mouth. She saw the river water draining off his drenched back, knew that he was still clinging to the rawhide reata, which had come undallied from the driftlog.

THE Lone Wolf saw her now. He was shouting to her, but no sounds reached her ears above the terrific din of the churning waters. He seemed to be coiling one end of the wet rawhide rope to a spindle of protruding rock.

Then the whirlpool released her and she felt herself being shot back into the racing current. With split seconds to go, she saw Jim Hatfield bracing his body on the rock ledge, throwing the rope in her direction.

Fainting with despair, the girl reached for the rope, seized it with both hands, felt the terrific current whirl her into the

bite of the lariat and coil itself around her body. Then the rope went taut and the force of the water carried her with slamming force against the rock wall of the cavern.

Her fingers locked in a death grip on the rope. Indistinctly through the screen of wet hair which matted her face she could see Jim Hatfield, looking like a drowned corpse, working his way along the ledge toward her.

Then his powerful fingers closed about her wrists. She closed her eyes, praying harder than she had ever prayed in her life, as she felt Hatfield's great strength pulling her inch by inch from the sucking grip of the river.

Her arms seemed to be wreching out of their sockets. There was an unmeasurable interval of time when it seemed inevitable that the river would win its fight against the man, refusing to be cheated of its victims.

Then Hatfield's arm was about her body and she felt her legs leave the foaming cascade. The Ranger was hauling her up on the flat shelf of rock to safety.

For long minutes the two of them lay there, gasping with exhaustion. Then Hatfield was helping her to her feet, leading her up another terrace of moss-slippery stone to where the action of long ages of water erosion had hollowed out a cavity in the cliff.

Here, ten feet above the river's deadly flow, the roar of it partially cut off by intervening ledges of wet rock, she heard Hatfield speaking for the first time.

"Lost both my guns. Might have been more merciful if I'd let the river take you, Alva. We can't get off this ledge."

Alva got shakily to her feet. By what miracle Jim Hatfield had been able to gain the safety of this ledge, she could not know. Only his bullhide chaps had protected his legs from the jagged rocks and the beating current.

Icy winds buffeted them, causing the Ranger to pick up the girl in his arms and stagger his way to the back end of the hollowed-out cavity. There was no opening through which they could crawl. And the ledge pinched off many yards short of the cavern mouth, making it impossible for Ted Ralls or anyone else to see them from the outside and attempt a rescue.

For the first time, the girl realized how futile Jim Hatfield's survival had been, how useless his daring rescue of her. They were trapped for eternity on this ledge inside the subterranean waterway. Starvation would be slow in putting an end to their physical torment.

CHAPTER XIII

Robbers' Treasure

SLOWLY Keefer waded back ashore to where Duff Probus stood watching the black maw of the Lost River canyon tunnel down stream. Now that the foul deed was done, Keefer felt a bitter regret at the angry impulse which had caused him to hurl Alva into the river. But Probus seemed to be satisfied.

"Only thing you could have done, boy," the convict grunted. "You're lucky she didn't trick you into sparin' her life with a false promise of marriage."

Keefer kicked mud off his boots and then turned his full attention on the evil-visaged man he had aided to cheat the gallows at Santa Casita penitentiary.

"Duff, I'm fed up with your stalling," Keefer panted. "The Ranger's gone. We've got nothing between us and lifting that Encinal dinero now. Where's it at?"

Probus shrugged, casting a longing glance at the six-guns in Keefer's holsters. He was thinking, "Del aims to kill me the instant I lead him to the cache. He's on the dodge now. I was a fool not to have gunned him down after we left San Antonio in the stock car."

Aloud, the convict said easily, "Come on. All we need is a forty-foot rope, amigo, and the swag is ours."

Keefer drew a Colt .45 and gestured angrily.

"Let's rattle our hocks, then. You lead

off, Probus. And remember, I'll have a drop on you every step of the way, so don't try any reckless moves. I know you don't aim to cut me in on that swag."

Probus grunted profanely. "Suspicious cuss, ain't you?" he countered. "I ought to tell you to go to blazes. You wouldn't shoot me as long as I know where the cache is."

Probus headed for the split in the cliff wall behind the cottonwoods. In a few minutes the two men were climbing the torturous, rocky pit of the fissure.

Both men were near exhaustion when they finally gained the rimrock level and saw the ranch buildings silhouetted against a westering sun. This eventful day was nearly over. A lifetime of danger had been crowded into it.

Off to the north they saw Hatfield's golden stallion and Ralls' pony waiting on the rimrock. The Riobend marshal was probably down in the bottom of the gorge, hoping against hope that he would see Jim Hatfield return up-river.

"I've got a fifty-foot rope on my kak," Keefer panted wearily. "I see my bronc grazin' over toward your winery."

They slogged their way across the ranch grounds to where Keefer's Twin F branded horse was grazing at the base of the vineyard ridge. Keefer, never once swerving his gun off Probus, waited until the convict had unbuckled the coiled rope from the pommel.

"Easiest way is down that well, I reckon," Probus said.

They rounded the side of the ruined *vinateria* which had been the scene of this morning's gun battle and halted in the deep weeds which concealed the opening of Probus' old well.

Keefer had pulled the rusty chain up from the hole. Probus now removed the rotten plank lid from the well and kicked the chain back into the opening.

"You go down first," Keefer ordered the outlaw. "I'm takin' no chances on a double-cross."

Probus grinned, slung his legs over the edge of the well opening, gripped the rusty chain and slid down out of sight. Keefer followed immediately, keeping one gun ready for use.

IN A few moments they had descended the twenty-foot shaft and were once more standing in the stygian gloom of the cave which led upwards to the wine cellar.

Keefer reached out in the darkness and seized Probus' arm. Reaming the muzzle of his six-gun into the convict's back, he said hoarsely, "Where to now?"

"Down to the dead end of this cave," Probus muttered thickly.

Probus struck a match, the flame of which tugged in the pull of air-currents. By its glimmering light they made their way twenty feet down the stalagmite- bristling floor of the tunnel.

Match after match Probus struck, lighting their way at last to the jump-off spot where this cavern connected with Lost River's channel.

While Keefer stood by, Duff Probus made one end of the sisal lariat secure by knotting it around the base of a heavy limestone stalagmite. The rest of the rope Probus dropped into the inky depths of the Lost River chasm.

"We'll slide down the rope to a ledge bordering the river," the convict said. "Ten minutes from now we'll be digging up those Encinal Roundup saddle-bags."

Keefer felt his heart pounding his ribs. Greed and avarice glinted in his eyes.

As the match in Probus' hand flickered out, Keefer gestured toward the hanging rope.

"You first," he said.

Probus coughed. "Just a minute, son," the outlaw protested. "You aim to kill me. I don't budge from this spot unless you leave those six-guns right here. With my fists, I figure I can hang onto my half of that dinero. But as long as you hold a drop on me, be danged if I'll ante up that dinero."

Probus struck another match. Keefer, reading the unshakable resolve in the outlaw's eyes, finally reached down and unbuckled his gun harness, tossing the holstered Colts back up the grotto.

"*'Sta bueno,*" Probus grunted. "Now,

just to make sure you don't hike back and get them guns, *you* go down the rope first."

Keefer shook his head. "Uh-uh. You'd cut the rope and drop me into the river."

They were at an impasse. It was Probus who suggested a way by which any double-cross could be averted.

"Go back and get them shootin' irons. Toss 'em into the river. Otherwise, go ahead and shoot here and now."

Cursing, Del Keefer went back up the grotto and recovered his guns. While Probus looked on by match light, he tossed the two .45s into Lost River.

Without further argument, Probus swung himself over the ledge and began sliding down the rope. He was reasonably certain that Keefer would not cut the rope, not so long as the secret of their Lost River loot remained with him.

As Probus' boots touched the rock ledge at the foot of the rope, he felt Keefer sliding down the rope above him. Probus reached around desperately, hoping to pick up a rock with which he could club Keefer to death, but the Twin F cavvy man reached the ledge before he could pry a stone loose.

This time it was Keefer who struck a match, cupping the little flame between his hands to shield it from the wind which howled down the Lost River passage.

A hundred feet ahead was the half-disc of gray daylight marking the mouth of the tunnel. Against that light, Keefer saw Duff Probus working his way along the yard-wide ledge ahead of him.

KEEFER hurried after Probus, shuddering at the rush of angry waters only a few feet below. He hugged the moss-wet wall of the tunnel, keeping close behind Probus.

Then, when they were standing in the spectral half-light where the ledge pinched off in front of a cavity in the stone wall to their left hand, Duff Probus turned.

"Here's where I stashed those saddlebags twenty years ago, Del," the convict said heavily. "This is the end of the trail. If you got any thought of chucking me into the river, forget it. There's money enough for us both."

Keefer grinned and extended a rope-calloused hand.

"Shake on it, pard," he said in a changed voice. "Reckon I'm a mite ashamed of myself for not trusting you."

They shook hands, neither trusting the other a whit more than before. Then Duff Probus turned and made his way to a slant of eroded gravel outside the hollowed-out cavity in the tunnel wall.

Probus' hands shook with excitement as he got down on his knees and started pawing at the mound of gravel. Old memories washed through him, reminding him how many times he had dreamed of this moment during the long years he had waited behind penitentiary walls.

Keefer was at his back, his full attention fixed on Duff Probus. Scooping away great handfuls of wet rubble, the convict exposed the half-rotted lid of an old wine-cask.

Del Keefer dropped to his knees beside Probus then, helping the outlaw pull the cask out into the open. Picking up a loaf-sized chunk of rock, Probus knocked open the lid of the cask.

"There's the dinero the six of us lifted from them stock buyers at the Encinal Roundup, *amigo*," Probus panted hoarsely. "Dig it out and see for yourself. Half of it's yours."

Keefer ripped away the rotten lid of the cask and reached both hands into it, pulling out a pair of age-stiffened leather *alforja* bags full of gold. Above the ceaseless roar of the river he imagined he heard the chink of gold coins, the crackle of mouldy greenbacks. Never in the history of the Western frontier had a treasure been so expertly hidden as this.

As Keefer lifted the loot-laden saddlebags out of the cask, Duff Probus came to his feet, lifting the heavy rock above his head with both hands.

"Gold makes men careless at the pay-off, Del!"

Keefer looked up, in time to see Probus' mighty hands sweep downward. Before the Twin F Connected cavvy wrangler

could lift a hand to ward off the down-coming bludgeon, Probus smashed the ten-pound rock down on top of Keefer's skull.

Bone popped like a crusty melon rind. Del Keefer was killed instantly, his skull split and dented like soggy bread.

Probus sucked in a deep breath. The road was clear to Mexico now. With this money he could reorganize his old border-smuggling outfit which had caused the American and Mexican authorities so much grief in the past. A year from now—

Then a sharp voice from nowhere blasted his dream:

"All right, Probus. I reckon this is show-down."

him with the agony of it.

Coming to their feet, like predatory animals in a finish battle, the two slugged toe to toe without gaining an advantage. Hatfield was fighting with a cool, rentlentless savagery now. Without guns, this would be a primitive combat to the death.

Probus ducked down, with the intention of scooping up a double handful of gravel and slamming it into Hatfield's eyes.

The big Ranger anticipated that foul tactic. Lunging in with every ounce of his hundred and eighty pounds back of the blow, Hatfield's right fist described its powerful arc to Probus' jaw.

The convict was lifted bodily off the

TRUE TEXAS FACTS

THE LITTLE DICTATOR: Santa Anna, captured during the Texan War of Independence, was slated for release on June 3, 1836, to be deported to Mexico. On June 1st, he was taken aboard the ship *Invincible* which waited at anchor in the bay off Velasco. When the Texans discovered Santa Anna was being released, such a storm of protest arose that President Burnet of Texas got a bad case of cold feet and had Santa Anna hastily brought back to prison. For a year then, the miserable ex-dictator was hustled from prison to prison, abused and humiliated, a political hot potato whom Texas wished heartily to get rid of, but couldn't figure out a way of doing it. Finally, in February, 1937, he was quietly sent to Mexico where he lapsed into obscurity.

Probus tore his gaze off Keefer's blood-dripping head against the saddle-bags of treasure to stare into the murky hollow above him. Poised like a panther on the sloping floor of the cavity, not five feet away, was the drenched figure of Jim Hatfield.

The lawman's silver-ringed law badge was pinned on his wet shirt now. Dim in the background Alva Ferris was crouched.

"No you don't, my Rangero friend!" shouted Probus.

THE two men pounced as one, colliding like bulls in mortal combat. Probus fell back before Hatfield's punishing fists, and both men lost their footing on the slick gravel as they went into a twisting, clawing grapple.

Probus fought desperately to lock his thumbs on the Lone Wolf's throat, but Hatfield's sledgehammer blows were pulping his face, cracking his ribs, dizzying

rock floor by the impact of the Ranger's terrific punch. His head snapped back and his arms windmilled as he reeled backwards.

Hatfield fell to his knees to avoid slipping over the rim of the ledge. Behind him, Alva Ferris screamed as she saw her father's killer somersault backwards into space, to strike the racing waters of Lost River with a splash.

Instantly the river plucked Duff Probus to its bosom. Before his body came back to the surface the outlaw had been swept a hundred yards down the secret underground course of the Lost River.

Hatfield got slowly to his feet and turned to face Alva.

"We'll leave Keefer where he lays," panted the Ranger. "All we've got to do is follow the ledge back to the rope ladder these buscaderos used to get down from the wine-cellar cave. I reckon your nightmare is about over, Alva."

A BALMY breeze was at their backs as Jim Hatfield, Ted Ralls and Alva Ferris headed back across the Lost River bridge on their return to the Twin F Connected ranch. High in the Texas sky, a silver-dollar moon cruised through myriads of stars. Far off a coyote bayed its lament to the night. The air was perfumed with sage and bluebonnet blossoms.

Strapped behind Goldy's cantle were the mouldy leather saddle-bags containing Duff Probus' outlaw loot. By now, the escaped convict's waterlogged corpse was probably spewed like so much carrion into the Gulfward-rushing waters of the Rio Grande.

But as Captain McDowell had said, recovering this long-lost loot was secondary, except to the insurance companies who had covered the loss to the meat packeries. Duff Probus' death was the most important feat Hatfield had achieved. Now the border would be spared the bloodshed and lawlessness which Probus' smuggling activities would have brought in the years to come.

This grim adventure seemed unreal to the Lone Wolf, accustomed though he was to violence and death. It was hard to realize that less than a week ago he had been training rookies at Dos Gatos.

At his stirrup, Ted Ralls and Alva Ferris were discussing their eager plans for carrying out Fenn Ferris' dream of making Twin F Connected the biggest ranch in West Texas. Their happiness put a twinge of melancholy on Hatfield's spirit, reminding him of how lonely life could be behind a Ranger badge. Bringing law and order to the vast reaches of the Lone Star State had crowded romance out of a lawman's life.

"You haven't given us your promise yet, Jim," Alva reminded him, her voice breaking his revery.

The Lone Wolf's lips lost their harsh fixture in the moonlight.

"Sure, I'll stick around to be best man at your wedding," he laughed. "Goldy and I aren't anxious to get back to Austin. Roaring Bill McDowell won't expect us back so soon anyway."

He saw the Rio Bend marshal lean from stirrups as Alva reined her strawberry roan close, saw the young lovers cling to each other in an embrace. High in the star-dusted heavens, a discreet moon hid its face behind a fleecy nest of cloud.

Coming Up in the Next Issue

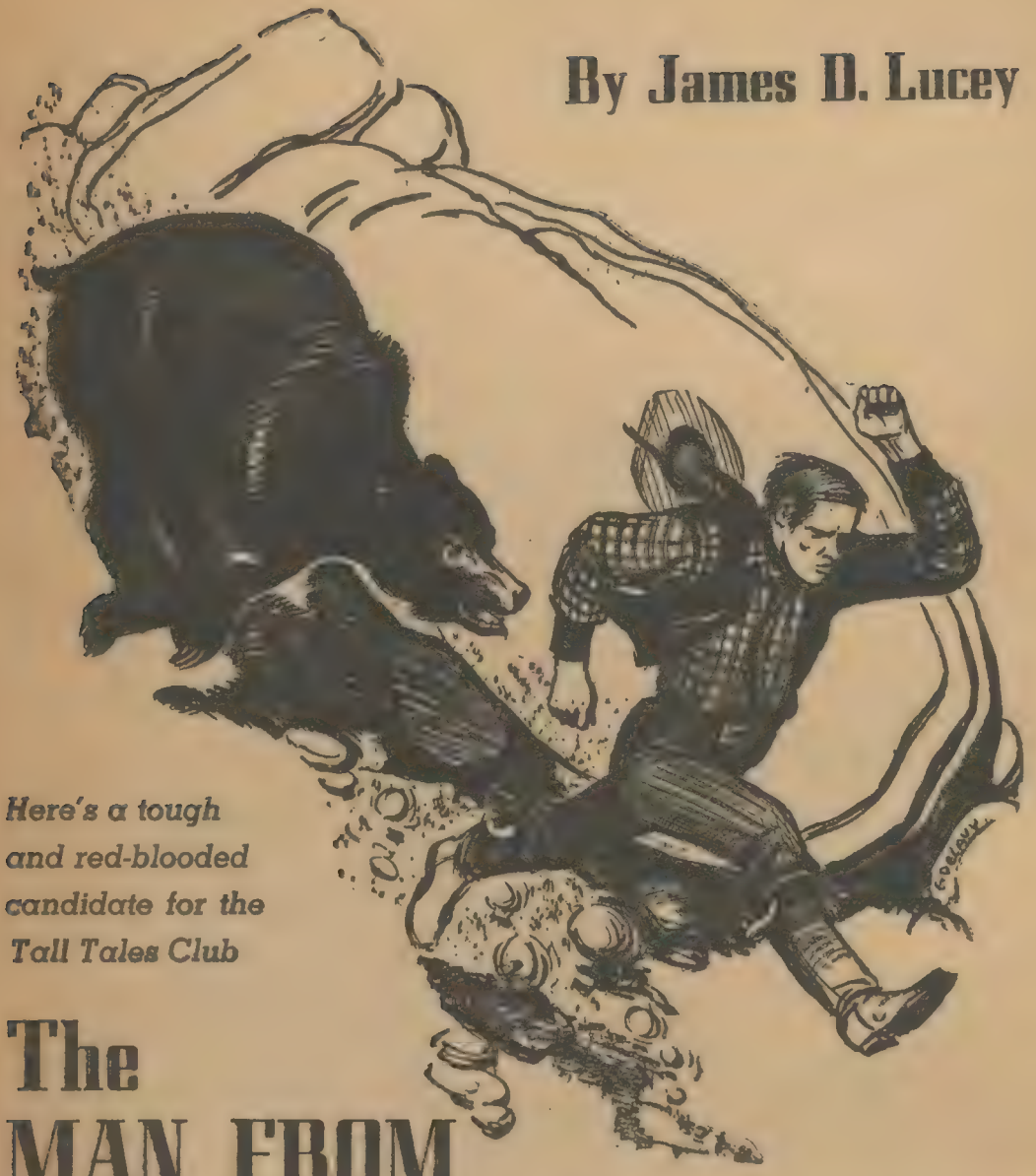
•

RIDERS OF THE STORM

Another Exciting Jim Hatfield Novel

By JACKSON COLE

By James D. Lucey



Here's a tough and red-blooded candidate for the Tall Tales Club

The MAN FROM RED DOG

THE-MAN-FROM-RED-DOG kept a Colt in his belt and a bowie in his boot, and both of them looked used. So you can see plain why we listened whenever he had something to say. But most often though, he just stayed down at the end of the bar and paid me and the customers no mind at all. In fact, that old trapper spoke so seldom that he almost had me wondering if we were worth talking to.

Of course, a good saloon is a place for good talk, but once in a while the boys got to going it so hot and heavy that there was likely to be hard feelings. When that

happened I'd ask The-Man-From-Red-Dog to give us his opinion, and that always stopped the argument. Because asking him to talk was just like when you turn on a beer bung—walk away and the beer keeps running till the barrel goes dry. He was like prospectors and long hunters, who collect three months of talk and have to unload it the first hour in town. And then they go mute.

Well, this one afternoon, he did worse than shut off the augerin' match. By the time he finished that whole saloon had gone plumb mute, too. We'd been outdone, and no error.

How it happened, the boys were going strong about a dime novel some fool greenhorn had left on the seat of Tommy McLean's stage. Now, that novel was a prime piece of print. All over the top of the cover, in big elegant letters, it said, Beadle's Half-Dime Library, and down underneath that, "Blonde Bill; or, Deadwood Dick's Home Base," by Edward L. Wheeler, who it claimed was author of "Deadwood Dick," "Rosebud Bob," "Gilt-Edged Dick," "Bonanza Bill," plus etc., etc.

We're all of us mad at this fellow, Wheeler, because underneath all these Dreadful Dans and Fearless Franks is a picture of a mining camp rough sitting on a horse, and he's holding onto another horse on which there is a girl, and her hands are tied together, and the rough is declaiming unto his fellow citizens like this:

"My name's Salamander Sam, pilgrims, ef ye don't know me, an' I've come down here ter sell this yere gal at auction, ter ther highest bidder. She's my darter, is Dashing Dol, an' I opine ef I want ter sell her, that's my bizness. So, now, feller citizens, ef enny o' yer want 'er, jest give me a starting bid. How much'll ye give fer her, boyees—how much, now, hoss an' all? Gal an' hoss! how much do I hear now, fer ther good will and fixtures—sole right and title—how much, now?"

Which is what we were having the big augering match about.

Tommy McLean declared for the eighth time, and louder than before, that no mining camp could be so absolutely green as to let Salamander Sam get away with what he was getting away with on that front cover.

OLD BURGESS cleared his throat, and Jess Rawson said he didn't just know about that—he'd seen towns that were powerful greenish. Vasquez said that if the father made the buyer marry the girl, it might be possible, and someone told him we weren't talking about "if." Old Burgess cleared his throat again preparatory to opinion, but somebody put in that Salamander Sam would turn out to be a kidnapper and not her father after all.

Old Burgess cleared his throat and quickly allowed what he always allowed, to wit: Men are peculiar critters and anything is possible. Then everyone looked at me and I said, "Maybeso, maybe not," because I was barkeep and didn't partake in liquor or arguments, neither one. Tommy shouted, Burgess rumbled, Rawson shook his head at everything that was said, and somebody accused someone of not knowing a salamander if they saw one.

I decided things were going to get general, so I slid the dime novel down the bar with a beer chaser and asked The-Man-From-Red-Dog if he'd ever heard of anything like that.

He started reading and after his beer was half gone he said, "Nope."

Tommy McLean stopped talking and left his mouth open, which demonstrates scientific just how startled they all were by the noise from down there. Before Tommy got his mouth shut, The-Man-From-Red-Dog was saying:

"Run into something near like it once, though. That was in Red Dog. This gal comes up against me where I'm standing at the bar. Her neck's dirty, but so was mine, so, natural, I gets to talking with her. 'Bout the time I'm telling her how me and Jim Bridger found the peetrified forrest with the peetrified birds a-singing peetrified songs, why, along comes this old gray-faced weazel and claims the gal's his daughter.

"Her name's June, and, mister, he's so proud of June that he wouldn't sell her not even was he offered two-hundred and fifty dollars. Meaning, I figure, two dollars and fifty cents. Well, I looked him over close, and I looked June over close,

and they sure 'nough came out'n the same mould, so I figured he *was* her father just like he said. Then I shot him."

"Shot him!" Old Burgess roared. "Well, men are peculiar cri—"

"And the girl?" Vasquez wanted to know. "What happened to her?"

"Damned if I know. I went out of town one way, circled around and come in sidewise and joined the posse that was leavin' town to get my hide. Seems like they resented me taking care of the town's business that way. They'd been meaning to shoot Weazel-Face for a long time, and a stranger like me shouldn'ta interposed. Well, we chased me near halfway to Washoe.

"All this time I'm trying to take up the drag and sort of let them win the race, but every time I start dropping back, the sheriff's quirt lands on my horse's rump and up I go again. Finally, he announces to all and everybody that once one man drops out of a posse they all do, so he's going to shoot the first man what drops out. They look like they believe he'll do it, and they know him better'n I do, so from then on I rode like I wanted to catch me pretty bad."

The-Man-From-Red-Dog shook his head at the predicament and frowned squinch-eyed at his beer, and some fool prompts him, "How'd you get away?"

"Didn't."

I SENT him a new beer, and he went on, "We come up to this river. Gulch it was, with a sort of weather-sprung plank-built bridge, and nothing much but rawhide holding it in the air. Posse didn't feel like crossing it, so one of 'em says t'me, 'You're small, go out and test it. See if we can ride over.' I wasn't no smaller than he was, but not wanting to look conspicular by arguing, I did like the man said. I'm out in the middle when someone hollers, *'That's him!'*

"They pulled their sixes and I sailed over the rest of that bridge like I was riding on them bullets. Then—*wham!*—a gun goes off *in front of me*. I seen I was trapped. The posse behind me was already coming ginger-like acrost that bridge. Someone, I don't know who, is hiding out in the rocks on the hill up ahead and he's shooting t'kill, too."

"Hit you?"

"Not yet he didn't. Me, I'm looking around for a place to drop—an' said place ain't easy to find when you're pinned on both sides. Another gun cuts loose from them rocks—*spa-a-ang!*—and chips from a rock spatter in my face. . . . See these little scars on my jaw? That's them. . . . I still ain't found where I can drop. Of course, by now I've surmised as them two on the hill is the Taylor Boys, they being the ones that robbed the stage about once a week.

"Spotting a gulch up ahead, I lope out for it with bullets going past me both ways. *Whack!*—high up in the shoulder it got me." The-Man-From-Red-Dog loosened his shirt and pulled the collar down and grunted, "Here. See that? Knocked me flat.

"For a while I just stayed flat and played possum. The Taylor Boys thought I was a posse man, and they thought they'd killed me. Posse thought they'd killed me, too, and was concentrating the rest of their mad on the Taylors. What with all them bullets flying and all them rocks being slapped, that air around there sure sung loud.

"Meantime, I'm edging over the gravel right slow, just taking my time, making for that dry wash. Pretty soon I'm on the edge of the slope. I let myself go and sort of slid into the wash like a corpse would. And right there was where I made my mistake."

He drank beer and looking at the bubbles, told us, " 'Cause when I hit the bottom of that wash, I sat up to feel of my shoulder, and sitting right across from me is a big-jawed, mean looking, powerful hungry *grizzly b'ar*.

"You know, Old Man Grizzly weren't so dumb. I reckon he knew he'd hang onto his hide by staying in that dry wash away from all them bullets. But Old Ephraim sure didn't look like he *enjoyed* waiting for all us people to go away. And

there I was, come down to him just so's he could munch a meal while he waited.

"Now, maybe you figure I had time to reach for my Colt. Me, I didn't think so. In fact, I felt awful previous about things, and I lit straight out down that dry wash with him a-loping and a-roaring behint me.

"There's a sort of erosion gulley up ahead that looks mighty good to me. It opens into the wash straight up and down, and it's no more'n about shoulder wide. I reckon I'll be safe from him in there, all right.

"I was close, doggone close, had maybe five feet t'go. *Wha-am!*—slam across the shoulder blades he got me. . . . Here. Wait'll I get this loose. . . . See them plow furoughs? That's it. . . . Way he hit me, it sent me flying right through the slot into that erosion gulley. So there I was, a-laying in there with the sense near knocked loose of me, and there he was, a-clawin' dirt from that entrance, roaring mad 'cause he was hungry."

HE STOPPED talking to stuff and light his pipe and puffed noxious vapors at us until someone said, "What happened then?"

He puffed some more and looked at us and said: "Well, by then I just plain didn't give a damn no more. I jumped to my feet and climbed out of that gulley, and right away someone took a shot at me, and someone else had a shot at that fella, and—ch-churr! ch-churrrr!—here's this diamond back rattler all curled up nice and cozy right in my way.

"Wagh! Now *I* was mad. I let loose a kick in his teeth that oncurled that diamondback right out straight as a prairie railroad. . . . Here. See that on my toe there? That white thing that's sort of nailed through the tip of the sole? Well, that's where one fang broke off.

"Next to where he's laying, Number Two rattler is sidling out of my way. But I ain't having none of that. Reaching down and grabbing holt of the rattlers on her tail, I haul her back, like I was pulling a whip toward me. I whirls her 'round my head a couple times and lets go. Which lands her up there in those rocks where the Taylors are at. Then I perceive that the other rattler is coming to. So he lands in the rocks the posse is in. Which leaves both sides powerful busy with their own affairs, and I amble back toward the bridge.

"Only I forgot someone else had been waiting for them guns to quit spring-spanging bullets around me. Then—*Wa-agh!*—Old Ephraim comes charging out of that wash, and we're off again. Now, I figured that bridge wasn't going to hold up under no bellering grizzly b'ar, so I beelined for that bridge. I jumped brush and rocks, and ran right through a prickly pear flat. I saw one big yellow boulder, size of a house squatting square in my path. Don't recollect no more about it—prob'bly jumped it. All I was thinking about was getting across that bridge first."

"Did you make it?"

"Sure did. I was in the middle of it when it starts creaking around under my feet and I know he's on it too. I'm most to the far side when—cree-eee-*rack!*—down goes the middle of the bridge."

"Well, it worked just like you planned!"

"Sure did. Old bear hit the river, and I reckon that knocked most of the brave out'n him 'cause that river weren't more'n one foot deep. Then with a *kerplunk* I land on his back. I'm bouncing off when he rises up under me to find out who hit him while he was down, so what with me bouncing and him pushing, I riz pretty far.

"Landed way off by the bank in a mud flat. Prying mud out of my mouth, I started to cuss some plentiful, and then I thought twice on it. Sure 'nough, Old Ephraim can't find whar I went to—he's too near-sighted. Can't smell me, neither. I reek real sweet of mud. Don't smell no different to him than a mud flat with tules growin' on it.

"He snuffs and growls around some, and lets out a good loud *wagh* just to show me, I reckon, that I better not get him sore again, an' he goes limping off upstream.

"Well, I let loose a sigh of relief that

come from so far down it aired my socks on the way. The posse and the Taylors was busy again, so I was safe there. The b'ar was gone. Fact, there weren't nothing but mosquitoes what could bother a man. I stood up and peered out of the tules—just to be sure, you know—and I oozed for the bank. That was when I lost my eye."

SOMEONE gasped: "Your eye!"

"Consarned onreconstructed friendly-tribe Paiute Injun had come up from his *rancheria* to see what all the shooting was about and if maybe he could pick up a spare scalp. I was the spare.

"He was standing right out in plain sight now, grinning mighty pleased with himself, and fitting another arrer to his bow while he waits for me to drop dead. There I stood, looking him over, his first arrer sticking out'n my eye and pointing at the culprit what did it.

"Now, you can pester a man just about so long. I didn't hold nothing against the posse—they were just out to do their duty. Nor against the Taylors—they thought I was the advance element of deploying troops.

"The b'ar was just hungry and maybe a little skeered by all that shooting. The rattler—well, that's what rattlers are for, ain't they?

"But this Paiute brave, he was just acting smart. And when a man gets that personal there's only one thing t'do. Which I did. I—drew—my—gun.

"Gun was full of mud. I threw it at him. Hit him smack in the chest, which weren't helpful to his aim, and the second arrer just sorta scratched along the length of my throwing arm. . . . Here, I'll show you. See that? Clean from wrist to shoulder....

"Now that arrer sorta roweled my feelings somewhat. Forgetting all about what I'd been planning on, I reached up and yanked that arrer from my eye and marched onto the bank to shove that arrer down his throat. Weren't necessary.

"Nope. *He* didn't forget what I'd planned for him. 'Stead of sticking with the weapon he knew, he grabbed up that Colt like he'd been having medicine dreams of this day for a long time. He sticks it out at me, using both hands, takes a wobbly aim, and lets go. Well, it sure went, you gotta say that. That bullet perused down the barrel and nosed into the mud and—*ba-ang!*—that gun and that Paiute went all over the lot.

"Then I left that part of the country and come here. It were too various for me."

Independence Opportunity

ADVENTURE WASN'T the only thing to be found by American young men who turned their faces "due west" in the early part of the Nineteenth Century. Plenty of money could be picked up too, if a fellow was smart enough to stop off at Independence, Missouri. For this was a lively metropolis in those days where an enterprising stockman could easily earn up to $50.00 daily. All he had to do was offer his animals for sale to the Santa Fe traders, since most of them set off from this point for the long trek to the Rocky Mountains and back.

Thousands of small wagons went out every year, drawn by either six yoke of oxen or twelve hardy mules. Caravans required approximately three hundred, with each animal carrying just about that much poundage, since the settlers far west were crying for merchandise. Consequently, teamsters and packers were in constant high-salaried demand as well, and their wages included rations.

A man could really hit the top financially by turning to freight hauling. The average transportation price from Independence to Santa Fe was ten dollars a hundred pounds, which perhaps wouldn't seem to amount to very much money—but most wagons were loaded with sufficient provisions to weigh close to six hundred dollars' worth, or more.

—*Bess Ritter*

GUN LAW

CHAPTER I

Gunfire Greeting

SLATY CLOUDS raced above the high peaks of the Whispering Skull country. Frost lay on the fantastic contours of the twenty-mile strip. It glittered in the moonlight like a great carpet studded with millions of diamonds. Patches of blue-black sky were rapidly closing and when that sky was banked solid, snow would drive in like white sand.

A rider crossed the Laramie that looped in silver curves over the floor of the valley. The swift current lashed at his saddle skirts, and he shivered at the bite of the water's chill. He came up out of the stream with the drip freezing on his boots and stirrups. A narrow bottom sprawled out along the shore and above that were high banks and a nightmare of broken country. Cattle grazed on the bottom.

Link Torkaway, the horseman, rode close to a small bunch and leaned out of saddle to get a look at their brand. The gibbous moon rolled away from behind obscuring clouds as if aware of the rider's intent, and its cold bluish light struck against the rump of one of the cows. Triangle D.

Link's eyes closed a little. It had been his business at one time to read brands. He had been a stock inspector. This brand seemed unusually thick. It did not stand out sharp and clean on the hide. The D crowded the sides of the Triangle.

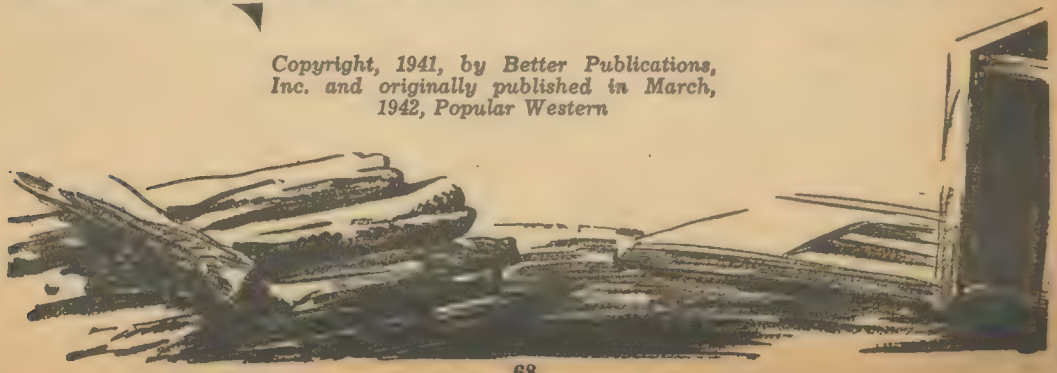
He shrugged and wheeled his horse away. Cattle were no longer his business.

At the wide mouth of a canyon the trail climbed steeply, and his bald-faced bay began to buckle into the slope like a goat. Wind drove through the canyon and numbed Link's face. There was a promise of storm in its shrill whine, and when he came out on a narrow, level bench, sharp pin-points of snow began to pelt against him. A hundred yards away, a string of timber bent to the will of the icy wind.

It was then that he realized he must have made a wrong turn somewhere and strayed from the beaten paths. He reined in his horse and was trying to orient himself when a rifle shot spanged through the stillness, and a bullet slammed against the steel fork of his saddle.. A flying piece gashed his hand.

Bending low over his bronc he rode for the screen of pines. Lead sang through the cold air again. This time he felt the bite of it at his shoulder. Skirting the timber's lower edge, he yanked a Winchester from its boot, and twisted around to fire behind him—and knew he had missed, for he heard no break in the pounding of iron-shod hoofs against the frozen ground.

Copyright, 1941, by Better Publications, Inc. and originally published in March, 1942, Popular Western



OF THE TORKAWAYS

By JOE ARCHIBALD

When a deputy rides into the Whispering Skull Country on a manhunt, the "whisper" rises to the deafening roar of guns

THE TIMBER closed around Link Torkaway as a bullet ripped into the bole of a pine just ahead of him. He let the bay have its head then, and the bronc wove its way through the trees. When they emerged on the far side, Link felt the ground drop away from beneath his bay's feet. Gallantly the mount tried to hold on, but went to its knees and rolled over.

Torkaway jumped clear, but tumbled twenty feet down the side of the low butte and struck his head against a big chunk of frozen hummock. For moments he lay there half-stunned, barely conscious of voices as men boiled out of the woods above him. One of them thrust his face close to Link's.

"Never saw this jigger before," he growled, deep in his throat, and snapped at Torkaway: "Who do you happen to be, mister?"

"Name of Smith," Link said. "Was ridin' through here. Didn't know it was a battle ground. Why so spooky, hombre?"

"It's a spooky land," said one of the others, a flat-nosed man with a pock-marked face. "That horse of yours fooled us. Looked like one we'd seen before. Smith, huh? Odd name, you lyin' skunk!"

Link Torkaway sensed the blow that was coming by the sudden wicked gleam in the flat-nosed man's eyes. He lifted his own hands a little too late. A fist caught him flush and dropped him. He was up quickly, but the man who had struck him had been whirled almost off his feet by the sweep of a tall rider's arm—the third of the attackers.

"Men have been named Smith," that man's voice barked angrily. "We'll take this bucko to the cabin and get a better look at him. The snow's comin' down thicker every minute. Get on your horse, Smith."

Link slid off the frozen shelf and walked a little unsteadily toward a clump of jack-pine where his bay, up on its feet and apparently uninjured, had found a wind break. He led the horse around in a circle, watched for signs of injury to its legs. Satisfied, he vaulted to the saddle and watched the trio that had handed him the gun welcome ease their broncs down the treacherous slide. There was no chance to make a run for it. The snow now was spreading a fuzzy white curtain over the land, blotting out all landmarks.

As Link Torkaway urged his bay along a narrow bench a rider lined up on either side of him, but he kept his eyes fixed on the broad back of the tall man who led the way. The wind seemed to increase in violence with every passing minute, and snow drove against men and horses until they were ghostly statues come to life and moving through the night.

The cavalcade cut through a tiny forest that dipped for a short way down a slope and masked the rim of a narrow valley for a third of a mile. Then the horsemen cut through a gorge in single file. Finally, as Link Torkaway lifted his head and brushed the snow out of his eyes he saw a light ahead and slightly below. The smell of wood smoke seeped into his nostrils, and for a moment anticipation of food and warmth made him forget the chill.

As they rode on through the snow, a cabin loomed up through the opaque curtain. His horse shouldered against the post of a fence, and immediately shied clear, blowing air through its nose. A man came out of the cabin, a lantern held aloft. The big man riding just ahead of Torkaway bellowed a greeting.

Outbuildings were outlined in the snow-choked yard, and the horsemen converged on the largest of them, with the man carrying the lantern leading the way. Torkaway dismounted from his bay and led it into the shelter of a long stable that had only one side. He pulled the saddle from the mount's steaming body and asked the tall man who was near him about feed.

"Your bronc'll be fed, Smith. You'll want somethin' inside yourself, huh?"

The tall man grinned, and for the first time Torkaway got a good look at the fellow's face when the lantern light struck against it. It was a forbidding countenance. The eyes were set too close together in a long equine face, and the nose with its wide flaring nostrils resembled that of an ape. A wide, thin mouth was drawn down

at one corner by a small jagged white scar.

Without another word Link Torkaway followed this man across the storm-swept yard and into the cabin. The heat from a great iron stove fanned out and enfolded him. He set his teeth against the wound in his hand as he sat down and let the cold drain from his tired body.

"Says his name's Smith, huh?" he heard a little moon-faced man who was in the cabin grunt. He talked as if he had gravel imbedded in his throat.

Torkaway lifted his head. The tall man with the closely-set eyes was staring at him. He had taken off his hat. Link saw now that a great thatch of coarse hair grew well down over the back of his neck like a mane.

"How far is it to War Gap?" Link asked.

"That where you was headin'? War Gap?" Long Hair suddenly bit out. "Aimin' to locate there?"

"I'm never sure just where I'll hang my hat," Link said. "Lost my way like some locoed gotch-ear. Ridin' that bay of mine nearly got me bedded down for keeps, huh?"

It looked to him as if he had stumbled onto some isolated cow outfit but he asked no questions about where he was. It was none of his business.

He had his own work to do, and that was in War Gap.

"I could use some coffee," he remarked casually.

"Give him some grub," Long Hair clipped and sat down on a bunk in a corner where the light scarcely reached him.

He leaned back against the wall and watched this stranger in the Whispering Skull country with his eyes almost shut. Link felt a singing along his nerves, felt Long Hair's eyes burning through him. The others in the cabin seemed to have lost interest in him, for conversation had become stagnant. Three punchers were grouped around a table feigning interest only in a pack of cards.

While Link munched meat and bread, and washed it down with black coffee, he threw quick glances about the dimly-lighted cabin. The personality of one man, it was plain, dominated the place, controlling the words and minds of this hard-bitten bunch—Long Hair. And he now was sitting as judge and jury. Torkaway sensed that he was on trial and would soon hear a verdict.

"All right, you jiggers!" snapped Long Hair suddenly. "Spread him out and we'll see what we can find."

Link shoved his chair back when he saw three men jump to their feet. The natural impulse to resist sent his hand streaking toward his holster. But his fingers froze close to the stock when the firelight struck against the steel of three other guns.

One man pinned Torkaway's arms and pulled him to the floor. Rough hands took hold of him, ripped his shirt open. They tore off his boots and rifled his pockets. Long Hair took Link's fleece-lined canvas coat off the back of a chair and went through its pockets. He flung the coat to the floor and swore.

"Not a thing," the flat-nosed puncher said huskily, and freed Link's arms.

"What did you expect to find?" Link roared. "Have I got a twin, like my bronc has, maybe?"

"Sorry, feller," Long Hair growled. "We kind of figgered you might be ridin' for somebody and didn't want to tell us who. Maybe your name is Smith, and maybe it ain't. We have our arguments in this valley same as they do anywhere else and we want to know when a salty outfit takes on a gun-slinger. Smith, your hands ain't showin' much wear from a lass' rope."

"Been out of a job for some time," Link said, and straightened his shirt. He sat down and pulled on his boots. "Give you my word I ain't hirin' out to nobody, mister."

SILENCE held once more. Long Hair went over to his bunk and sat down again. The snow beat against the windows, and the wind lashed at the cabin's weathered sides. Link got up, crossed the room and opened the door.

"The storm's lettin' up some," he commented. "I reckon I'll take a chance and ride on."

"Don't like our company, Smith?"

"The hospitality wasn't exactly spontaneous," Link drawled and grinned. "Thanks for the chuck and the royal welcome, Long Hair."

He went out of the cabin, and now the drive of the abating storm tasted sweet to him. But he felt a heavy pressure at the small of his back. And there was a dull ache under his breast-bone. He saddled his horse and rode across the yard, watching the cabin as he saw a crack of light widen and he urged his horse forward.

His snap shot at the door of the cabin delayed the crack of a rifle. Then a bullet sang close to his cheek and he gave the bay a taste of steel that sent it racing through the night.

"Long Hair brought in his verdict just a bit too late," Link murmured into the wind. "He took too much time."

He heard the rifle back there crack again. Then the wind drowned out all sounds save the pounding of the bay's hoofs. The bronc found the way out through the gorge, and when it ran along the edge of a stretch of timber, the snowfall thinned noticeably. The moon was breaking through the slaty clouds, and giving some light to the rugged snow-blanketed terrain.

Link Torkaway rode to the crest of a hogback and peered at the wintry landscape spread out below. He made sure there were no sounds or signs of pursuit behind him, then prodded his bay to motion once more and rode down into the valley.

CHAPTER II

Long Reach of the Law

WHEN Link Torkaway was a good ten miles from the benchland where he had nearly been removed from the scheme of things, he dismounted from his horse. He built a fire in a natural cave that the elements had scooped out of the ground in the lee of a great overhanging rock, sat down, and took off one of his boots. He felt of the badge he had pinned inside a heavy woolen sock that no one had bothered to remove and grinned crookedly. Long Hair's men had been a little careless.

The fire warmed Link, and a million little needles seemed to be sticking into his skin as the cold blood in the veins of his legs began to heat up. He took cold biscuits and bacon from his saddle-bags and ate them slowly. He listened to the sounds running along the crest of the wind, but heard more plainly the violent pounding of his heart—for good reason, that had nothing to do with possible pursuit.

For every mile eaten up by his bronc had brought him that much nearer to Beth Calhoun, who once had meant so much to him. He would have to watch the way he looked at her. A man could change a lot of things in himself, but not his eyes. Link hoped that for once the old lawman, Sam Torkaway—his own father—had been wrong about Beth's father. He hoped Bill Calhoun was dead, but he had to know.

Huddled in his blankets, Link thought of the days that had gone. In the dying embers of the fire he saw a man sitting on the porch of the sheriff's office up in Palamar—sat in his wheel-chair and watched the town at work. Sam Torkaway would never walk again because the doctors had been unable to do anything about the outlaw bullet that was imbedded in his spine.

Sam had been in his wheel-chair a year the night three men had come in to rob the Palamar bank, and he had wheeled himself out of the livery stable to empty two saddles with as many shots.

It was that night a man had said to Torkaway, and Link had been close enough to hear:

"I don't reckon you'll ever be quite finished, Sam. Never quite satisfied."

"That's right," old Torkaway had replied, a strange look in his weathered face. "I don't figure I'll ever be."

People up in Palamar boasted of the old lawman. They said that no man who had broken the law while Sam Torkaway wore

his badge had ever escaped his just dues.

Link knew that his father always fretted a little when he heard those things said about him. He knew that a doubt lingered in Sam Torkaway's mind, for there was one man that the old sheriff had never been quite sure about—Bill Calhoun.

Now Sam Torkaway's voice seemed to come out of the fire's glowing coals. Link had heard that same voice and those same words often on his way to War Gap.

"There's somethin' a Torkaway started and maybe didn't finish, Link. I got to find

The facts of the case regarding Calhoun were written indelibly in Link's head. It had been a bad year for cows. Bill Calhoun's wife had been sick. Calhoun owed a gambler named Kregg money. The gambler was pressing for payment. Calhoun had come into Palamar that night and began drinking, something Calhoun seldom did.

SAM TORKAWAY himself had found Calhoun in Kregg's office standing over the body of the gambler. Kregg's

TRUE TEXAS FACTS

THE NAMING OF TEXAS: Explanations of the name "Texas" are numerous. The early Spanish explorer who covered this country, Alvarez de Pineda, drew a map and called it "Amichal." Where then, did the name "Texas" come from? One theory says that it came from the characteristically shaped huts of the Indians which were called "tejas" or "texas" in Spanish. Another school of thought holds that it comes from the word "Mixtecas" which was the general name for the Indians of that territory who were supposed to be descendants of Mixecatl. Another theory says it came from the Indian word for friend—"tehas" with which the natives greeted the first explorers, before they got to know them better. That's the line-up—take your choice!

out, and I can't do it myself because I haven't got legs under me any more."

"You've got to forget Bill Calhoun," Link had said the first time those words had actually been spoken. "Folks here think he's dead. Went over that high bank at Orm's Point and into the river, didn't he? Never was seen again. You're being plagued by a ghost, Dad."

"Reckon not—the feelin's too strong," old Torkaway had insisted. "Son, when they pin a badge on you, you take an oath to uphold the law. You got a job to do and you're sworn to it. It makes no never mind who it is breaks the law. You play no favorites. I rode out of this town on the heels of Bill Calhoun almost fifteen years ago. He was my best friend. I'm hopin' he's dead, like they say, but after all these years I'm not sure."

Link Torkaway threw a chunk of wood in the dying fire. Up in Palamar, the people said lawing ran in the Torkaways. Link wondered if the strain was running out, for although he had taken on his father's job for what lay ahead, he had no heart for it.

skull had been caved in, and there was blood on the handle of Calhoun's gun. Calhoun had said it was there because he had examined the wound on Kregg's head before the sheriff arrived.

It was an old picture. Link wished he could get it out of his head. Sam Torkaway had laughed—bitterly—at Calhoun's reason for being in Kregg's office, and had pointed to the door of the safe that stood partly open. There had been a little drawer pulled out. It was full of I.O.U.s and currency and Calhoun admitted that he had heard that Kregg was going to slap a judgment against him and had gone to see the gambler to get him to hold off for a while.

Bill Calhoun had lost his head when Sam Torkaway had laughed at him, and he had made his break. He had ridden out of Palamar on a stolen horse after having shot the owner in the leg.

"That was when and how Dad figured it out," Link told himself as weariness crept over him. "If a real badman had killed Kregg, he said, the stuff in the safe would've been stolen. One part of the

picture always stumped me. Only one horse was out at the hitch-rack that night. It was after midnight. Lucky for Calhoun that bronc was there. Or am I believin' Calhoun ain't dead?"

For now something had happened which had prompted Sam Torkaway to take up the case that was fifteen years old.

"Small world, Link," the old lawman had said not ten days ago. "I stopped in to talk to Dib Holloway who prints the *Weekly Argus.* Fellers like him have a kind of fraternity, son. They exchange papers so's they don't miss any news for hundreds of miles around. Got hold of one from War Gap, Wyomin'. It's down close to the Colorado line. Saw a name in that paper. Beth Calhoun. Advertisin' her dry goods store. Remember Beth?"

Link smiled now in the semi-dark. His father might just as well have asked him if he remembered the way the sun rose and set every day in all its color and glory. He had been in love with Beth ever since she had been all elbows and knees and had had pigtails down her back.

When she had gone away to Denver after her father's disappearance—the world had been moved almost three hundred miles away from Link Torkaway.

Now the law was reaching out for the Calhouns again. Link's father had reasoned that Beth Calhoun would not have left a good job in Denver to settle in a town like War Gap unless some mighty good reason had drawn her there.

Sam Torkaway had told his son that he had kept track of Beth's movements from the day she had left Palamar, for he knew that if Calhoun ever turned up alive, he would want his daughter near him. Beth was all he had now, for his wife had died soon after he had disappeared.

"A rotten business," young Torkaway growled. "I don't want a badge to ever mean as much to me as it does to Dad. The tarnish off a tin star can eat into a man's soul. When I finish this job, I'm through with my star, for good."

And he was remembering his father's last words to him before he'd set out for War Gap. "She won't never know you, son. I'd let my beard grow and try to grab a job with some cow outfit down there. I don't figure you'll fool Bill much if he's alive, and he'll be on his guard. He'll have changed his own looks if he's there. I don't know as how I can tell you what he looks like. He don't walk no different than any other man. But his eyes are the color of steel. Understand, Link, if it had been a small thing Bill had done—but he killed a man."

"I'll bring Calhoun back," Link heard himself say now, as the wind howled around him.

For he had given his word. But it was bitter to know that keeping that word meant letting the girl he loved more than anything in the world lead him to a murderer. After that, there would not be much left for Link Torkaway. The thought brought a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. Desperately he hoped that his father had been all wrong, but it was a pitifully thin hope. Sam Torkaway's hunches were never wrong.

LINK was in the saddle at dawn. Shorn of its nocturnal mantle, the Whispering Skull country lay before him in all its wild grandeur. The fantastic colorings of serried walls and battlemented hills, together with the jagged irregularity of their crests channeled by the weather into great spires and buttresses, gave them a look both terrible and grotesque. The highest peak left Link breathless. Nature had chiseled it into the form of a human skull, and he knew how this strip of land had received its name.

The young lawman rode all that day. Cattle, wintering in the hills, bunched up to fight the cold wind, stood dumbly and watched him pass. The wilderness gradually opened out and he rode deeper into lush ranching country. He passed close to a small cattle spread. The name on the wooden mail-box affixed to the top of a cedar post said:

BILL CHANCE

One side of the small ranchhouse was blackened. The wind whipped up an acrid smell from the charred ruins of an out-

building and drove it against Link Torkaway's face. He shook his head, recognizing the familiar ear-marks of ranch tragedy.

Link rode into War Gap an hour later and found the town humming. Snow had began to fall again and it drove against the windows of the double row of wooden buildings along the main street and made dry rattling sounds.

Link hauled in on the reins of his tired bay and scanned the board walks

Over the doorway of one narrow store sandwiched between the hay and feed store and the laundry he saw a wooden sign swinging in the wind. It read:

CALHOUN'S

Link's heart thumped against his ribs, and not from the exertions of the last stage of his journey. Music boiled out of the second-story windows of a big square building marked "Odd Fellows' Hall," and the laughter and talk of women and men blended with it.

Link rode to the livery stable, and got down from the bay. The hostler eyed the steaming mount closely for a few moments and then grinned.

"Thought for a minute you was a horse thief," he said. "A rannihan from the Open A rides a bronc a heap like this one you got here. But I see the difference now."

"Passed a set of ranch buildings comin' here," Link said. "The name of Chance was on the mail-box. Had a fire recent didn't he?"

"Heard so," the livery man said cautiously. "I don't ask too many questions these days, mister, and I've lived here fifteen or twenty years."

The inference was plain. Link made no more remarks, had a smoke, and went out. He crossed the now dark street to the saloon, went in and shouldered his way to the bar. What seemed like about a hundred faces swam in the tobacco haze. They were all strange to Link.

He asked for three fingers of rye to take the chill of his long ride out of his bones. But when he lifted his drink, he saw one face in the bar mirror that had not been there a moment before. It had a flat nose and the skin was pock-marked.

"You cover a lot of territory, hombre," Link said in a dry voice, without turning.

"I know the short cuts, Smith. How do you like the town?"

"Pleases me right well," Link bit out.

CHAPTER III

War Gap

LINK downed his drink, wheeled away from the bar and stalked out of the saloon. He stood on the walk outside, watching the town and listening to the steady rumble of men's voices. He felt conscious of dozens of eyes on him wondering if his presence in War Gap had rolled back the years for a certain man in whom he was interested.

The darkness deepened and the half-dozen carbide street lamps glowed in the snow-choked night like eerie will-o'-the-wisps. The noise of War Gap stepped up. After a while Torkaway's eyes were drawn to the skies toward the northeast. The blackness there was broken by a great ruddy glow. He spun on his heel and flung open the heavy winter door of the saloon.

"Some place on fire out there on the range!" he roared. "The sky's all lit up!"

A puncher, hatless, his heavy thatch of hair plastered down in preparation for the dance, thrust Link aside as he bolted outside.

"That blaze is in the direction of Pladwell's Open A!" he yelled.

Link was swept out through the door as the crowd in the saloon broke for the street. He swung against one side of the frame building and watched a score of riders race away from the tie-rack and pound along War Gap's wide main street.

In a few minutes the furore had died. The high-heeled boots of some of the men who had remained in town banged their way up the long flight of stairs to the Odd Fellows' Hall and the dance. Other men crowded into the saloon again. Link saw

the pock-marked waddy with the flat nose standing on the edge of the walk, looking toward the reflection of fire in the cold storm-swept sky. The fellow's thick lips were curled in a smile as he turned and walked past Link.

"Fires seem to happen right often around here," Link remarked to him.

Flat-nose stopped abruptly, his hard eyes boring into Link.

"Be a heck of a night to have to bury a man," he said. "Frost's six inches deep, Smith."

"If I'd been that jigger from the Open A you thought I was the other night I reckon I'd have never got a head start for War Gap, Flat Nose."

"I got no time to gab with a—dead man," the squat rider growled and stamped along the planked walk.

The tempo of the town increased. Link Torkaway built himself another smoke. Suddenly he paused, listening. Was that a voice he heard coming out of the dark, or was it just a tricky sound fashioned by the whining wind? He moved along the walk to where a cluster of locust trees made a break in the line of buildings on that side of the street. He saw a flash of white, heard the rustle of skirts.

"No, not here," a girl said in a small choked voice. "Somebody will see."

Link silently moved up close, the powdery snow screening him. He saw a girl straining away from a big, husky man who had his arms around her. Her face turned toward Link, and she cried out something that was quickly whipped away by the gale.

"Looks like you need help, ma'am," Link said. "Let go of her, mister!"

The bulky man thrust the girl away from him and dropped his right hand toward his holster, but before he could drag his Colt loose, Link drove in. He smashed his fist against a shadowy face. The blow did not drop his man, though, so he lowered his head and hit the fellow in the stomach, drove him against the big bole of a giant locust. He heard a solid body hit wood with a whacking sound. The big man sagged to the ground, his breath wheezing out of flattened lungs.

Link backed up. The girl sprang at him and beat her fists against his chest.

"You crazy fool!" she cried. "You've knocked Al Dutcher down!"

She whirled and dropped down beside the huddled figure, then straightened as quickly, a six-gun in her hand. She leveled it at Link, walked toward him.

"Start moving if you want to live!" she said in a voice that shook. "Get on your horse and travel!"

Link Torkaway was more surprised than scared. "Women sure beat me," he said with a cold grin. "You save 'em from a maulin' and they want to scratch your eyes out for it. Who's this great Dutcher?"

THE girl came into the light shining through a store window. Her eyes were big and round and dark, and on her small nose was a smattering of freckles. Her lips were full and red. At the corner of her mouth was a tiny scar where a kid in Palamar had once hit her with a stick.

Beth Calhoun! She stared at Link without recognition, her eyes stormy and showing fear.

"Dutcher? Who is he? He's the biggest man in this country, mister!" Beth's lips were trembling a little. "You must go at once, he'll kill you."

"I ain't in the habit of runnin', ma'am," Link said bleakly. "Drop that gun and go in where it's warm."

"Please go!" she pleaded. "I don't want to see you killed!"

"Beth," a voice shaking with rage boomed out, "give me that gun."

Eyes narrowed to cover a burning heat, Link watched the big man approach. Rage purpled Al Dutcher's cheeks. He was pawing blood from his mouth.

The girl spun around. "No, Al! No! He didn't know who you were. He—"

Link laughed and lunged forward. He twisted the .44 loose from Beth's shaking fingers, hurled the weapon at Dutcher. It caught the big man full in the chest and tore a grunt of pain out of him.

"Pick it up, Dutcher!" Link challenged. "I'll wait!"

Men poured out of the doorway leading to the dance hall. They swarmed out of the saloon. And all seemed to freeze at once when they saw what was happening out there in the middle of the street.

Beth screamed once and threw her hands up over her face. Al Dutcher picked up his gun and tried to throw a shot all in one motion. The roar of Link's .44 drove pulsating echoes against the sides of the frame building.

Dutcher cursed crazily, and lifted a numbed hand shoulder-high. His Colt dropped and slid into the snow. He let it stay there and rested on one knee to stare at the man who had humbled him in the sight of the entire town.

"Reckon that's over for now," Link said, and turned slowly to watch the men lining the walk. He called to Beth Calhoun, "If you want, I'll see you home, ma'am."

Beth moved away, her step heavy. A man caught her by the arm and helped her to the walk.

"I said to leave the girls alone, Al!" this man yelled at Dutcher. "You better start for home."

Link studied the man who had taken over. The man had a wide, rugged face, and his eyebrows and mustache were peppered with gray. The veins bulged at his temples, and anger had drained all the color out of his face. He wore town clothes, a wide-brimmed beaver hat keeping his eyes in shadow. But in spite of his garb, he was plainly a rancher.

Al Dutcher got to his feet, laughed into the big cattleman's face.

"Don't let what you just saw fool you, Buck," he sneered. "Be careful the way you look at me, too, and of what you say, savvy? I'll take orders from you when I feel like it. Tonight I don't feel that way. I'll go out to your Rafter K in my own good time, Buck Thorne."

Dutcher swung his eyes toward Link, and they were filled with the threat of sudden death.

"Smith, this country ain't wantin' you in it," he ground out. "If you stay, it's where you're goin' to be buried."

"Funny," Link drawled. "I don't recollect givin' you my name, Dutcher. You must be acquainted with a gabby little bird, huh? Any more about me you know?"

As Dutcher trapped his lips and picked up his gun his cold smile did not escape Link. Dutcher strode to the walk and threw a shoulder against the big man who had ordered him out of War Gap. It was a gesture of open defiance, of contempt. When the grizzled cattleman took it without remonstrance it set Link to wondering. There was a crazy pattern to this Whispering Skull country.

Dutcher was moving along the walk now and Beth Calhoun walked with him. A thought occurred to Link that put a chill in his veins, stronger than the one the cold wind had to offer. There were patches of silver at Al Dutcher's temples. That cold smirk of Dutcher's seemed to have told Link that the man knew who he was and the reason for his being in War Gap. Could it be possible that Al Dutcher was Bill Calhoun? No, because he would have recognized a Torkaway, even after fifteen years, for in that time Link had grown

TRUE TEXAS FACTS

THE PANTRY SHELF: Early Texans ate better than commonly supposed, judging by stories of pioneer hardships. Corn was the basic food item; it was planted so widely that like today in Iowa, the wealth of a section could be estimated from the number of acres planted. In addition there were plenty of cattle, affording good supplies of meat, plus "milk, curds, clabber and butter." Jerked beef, dried in the sun, Indian-fashion, was a staple, and school children took it along for lunch, as did men on a journey. Along the coast the fare was even richer, it was supplemented by fish, turtles, oysters, crabs and similar succulent items. Like most country people, whatever the privations of their lives, they usually managed to eat well.

to be much like his father. But certainly Dutcher would have drilled Link out there in the street if he had been a little quicker with his gun.

And Beth being at the dance with Dutcher could add up. The man was old enough to be her father.

LINK stared after them a moment more, shrugged, and turned back to the saloon.

Hard-bitten punchers stood aside to let him pass when he strode in. He took a table in a dark corner facing the door, and watched the faces and the actions of the men drinking in the place. He sifted that crowd with sharp eyes and thought he knew his enemies when he was finished. The tension left after the street brawl finally gave way and the noise stepped up again.

It died down a bit when Al Dutcher came into the saloon. His lips were puffed and bleeding and there was danger in his eyes. Link saw a man nudge Dutcher and incline his head, then Dutcher looked toward Link's corner. The big man took a drink, studied the liquor for a while, then banged the glass down on the bar and walked toward Link Torkaway.

Link shoved his chair back slowly and got to his feet. Dutcher spread his hands wide.

"Don't blow up, Smith," he said placatingly. "I'd like to talk to you. Maybe you're lookin' for a job. There's no reason why we couldn't get along. Set down."

"You run the Rafter K?" Link asked quietly. "I heard you mention it a while ago."

Dutcher grinned as he sat down. "I do, even though I don't own it. That plain enough?"

"Who was the gent you talked down, Dutcher?"

"Buck Thorne—owns the spread. But he knows which side his bread is buttered on, Smith." Dutcher spoke blandly. "I hire and fire. We could use a good man. Let's bury the hatchet with a drink."

Link watched Dutcher's eyes. They were not smiling, although Dutcher's lips were. He guessed that if any hatchet was buried in War Gap soon it would be in his own head.

"A good man with a rope an' a good bronc or a salty cuss with a fast gun is what you want, Dutcher?" Link asked. "Thanks just the same for the drink. Don't use it except for medicine, and I ain't quick to make up my mind."

Dutcher's smile faded. His lips twisted away from his strong white teeth.

"Smith, I'm warnin' you. The only place where you'll be safe is at the Rafter K. There's only one side for you to take in what's goin' on in this country."

Dutcher's face was black with anger. Link studied it closely. The man's thick black mustache was the color of the long burnsides growing down from silver-dusted temples. There was a scar along one side of his nose. Three of Dutcher's front teeth looked to be false.

"There was a time, Smith," Dutcher said, getting to his feet, "when the world kicked me around. I got a lot of collectin' to do and a lot of old scores to settle. And nothin'—nothing' is goin' to stand in my way!"

CHAPTER IV

Sudden Death

A RATAPLAN of hoofs came from the street outside. Men moved away from the bar, and the hubbub of sound in the smoky saloon stretched thin. The door was banged open. Three men barged in with a great blast of snow and wind. Link followed Dutch across the floor, and caught the smell of wood smoke coming off the steaming clothes of the new arrivals.

Faces smeared with soot, eyes red-rimmed and watering from the bite of smoke and drive of the wind, they were a bleak lot. The tallest of the three men took off his hat and banged it against the top of the bar. When he wheeled to lay

his gaze against Al Dutcher the quiet that gripped the saloon seemed to have actual weight. He was a weathered old cattleman, this man who stood up to "Buck" Thorne's bucko foreman. He had little hair left, and his eyes were set deep in his head.

"My haystacks were fired tonight, Dutcher," he said, splitting the numbed silence. "A thousand tons of winter feed gone up in smoke. A stable caught and went to ashes, too. We nailed a man, Dutcher. He used to ride for you."

The door opened. Buck Thorne, owner of the Rafter K, came in. Link eyed the man briefly, then turned his attention back to the others.

"What about it, Pladwell?" Dutcher asked, and grinned insolently. "You mean I might've set your fire?"

"Shorty Lee shot him off his horse, Dutcher, before he could get to the timber," Pladwell said. "Long Hair Duval was his name. He rode a bronc carrying a Rafter K brand on its rump. You and Thorne make a present of a good horse to a jigger when you pay him off?"

"Look here," Buck Thorne roared. "You can't accuse me like that, Pladwell! Long Hair could've stolen that horse. He's a wild cuss and I've heard he's with a wild bunch since we had to fire him."

"Shut up, Buck," Dutcher snapped. "He was accusin' me. I'll answer for the both of us."

Link watched Thorne's face, with a random thought that he had named his attacker out at that cabin right—"Long Hair." The Rafter K owner checked his words, and stood there with his fists clenched and pressed against his thighs. Thorne's glance clashed with Link's and held for several breathless seconds. Thorne's eyes swung away first.

"Dutcher, you're gettin' too big for this cattle strip!" old Pladwell roared. "You run a gun outfit and you have ridden small owners into the ground. Cattlemen like Bill Chance. Thorne, when are you goin' back to givin' the orders on your own spread?"

Dutcher laughed. Faces around the bar twisted with significant grins.

"Why, I'm lookin' out for Buck's interests, ain't I?" Dutcher drawled, "That's what a good foreman gets paid for, Pladwell. So you go and prove what you're sayin', old man, or I'll burn the rest of your Open A."

"We've got Long Hair over at the doctor's office, Dutcher," Pladwell said, and smiled icily. "Brought him in to get him patched up. He ought to be able to talk by mornin'."

Al Dutcher stiffened. A gray shadow swept across Buck Thorne's face. Dutcher had his fingers close to his .44 and Link watched them closely. The gun he noticed, had a polished bone handle and there were little veins running through the bone.

"Maybe we'll find out a lot of things," Pladwell said, his riders closing around him. "For instance, why the Open A was short nearly a thousand cattle when the roundup was over. My calf tally over the last three years proves that, Dutcher. We ain't had no hard winters durin' that time to kill 'em off."

"If you was twenty years younger, Pladwell," Dutcher ripped out, "I'd split your spine. Why don't you take your big mouth over to the sheriff's office?"

"I have, Al. Such as the sheriff's office is. Because it's right in your pocket, and everybody knows it."

"We're ridin', Dutcher," Buck Thorne called out. "This snow's goin' to be deep in another hour. Pladwell, you got no proof Al had anything to do with your fire."

"Not yet, Buck," the Open A owner said, and sneered, "I remember when you was a man, Thorne. When you didn't want to gobble up the whole range, and didn't have killers on your pay-roll. You've caught Dutcher's disease, and look out you don't die of it."

"Come on, Buck," Dutcher said. "I'm sick of listenin' to that old crow squawk."

WITH six riders at his heels, the Rafter K foreman stumped out of the place. Thorne looked hard at Pladwell, the muscles at his jaws showing

white. He seemed on the point of saying something, then clamped his teeth shut and went out into the storm himself.

"Who runs the Triangle D?" Link asked Pladwell.

"Huh?" Pladwell seemed to notice him for the first time. "Who are you?"

"Name's Smith." Link grinned.

He glanced at the flat-nosed man in the bar mirror. The puncher's ugly face was stony, but his beady eyes never left Link's face.

"Pladwell," a man at the bar said, "you're looking at the jigger who just run a sandy on Al Dutcher. Shot Al's hogleg out of his fingers after he laid him flat with his fists."

The old cattleman looked at Link Torkaway closely then.

"That so? Seems like I've seen you somewhere before, Smith. Couldn't have, though. Could I, son? I been here twenty years and you're pretty young. Funny how faces stick in a man's mind."

"Like horses," Link replied. "Who rides a bald-faced bay on your outfit, Pladwell?"

"Shorty Lee."

"I see," Link muttered under his breath. "Long Hair Duval figured I was him when—wonder if you could use a good hand, Pladwell. Kind of like the looks of the rannies who ride for you."

"I didn't answer your first question, Smith," Pladwell said. "Triangle D? That's a two-bit outfit over by Hackberry Creek. Owned by a man named Chug Schrader."

"How far from here?" Link said, his eyes narrowing.

"South, about eleven miles."

The flat-nosed puncher set down his glass and moved toward the door.

Link felt the shock of Pladwell's words. Because over there to the northeast, near the Laramie, he had seen Triangle D cattle bunched.

This was something that did not add up.

The door opened and closed. Link looked toward the window with its panes clogged with snow. In one of the openings he saw a face. The flat-nosed man grinned his hate, then was gone.

"Who's watchin' Long Hair besides the doc?"

"Sheriff Olway," the Open A owner said. "He was made responsible for that jigger."

"You're fools!" Link said, and went out of the saloon.

As he walked through the snow, a definite feeling of uneasiness dogging his steps. He looked up at a window over a store that bore the name of Beth Calhoun, and he thought he saw a curtain move, then drop back into place again.

A swinging sign banged against a post and spun Link around. His nerves were singing. He quickened his step.

Late as it was, only one street lamp was burning in the street. The wind howled, and whipped up the stinging snow and threw it against the darkened doors and windows. Link strained his eyes, looking for the doctor's sign that must be nailed against the front of one of the frame buildings.

As he bent his head to the storm and rounded a corner, something struck him solidly. Instinctively he threw up his hands to clutch at what had catapulted against him. A heavy fist crashed into his face, and he pitched sideward, floundering in a drift that was piled three feet high at the corner of the alley.

Link pulled himself out of the snow. His brain whirled, and the left side of his face was numb. He pulled his Colt and fired it into the air, then staggered along to a darkened doorway. Up at the head of a flight of stairs, a light suddenly shone and a man roared thickly:

"You get the skunk? He killed that wounded jigger right here in my office! Knocked the sheriff out!"

Link stumbled up the stairs, looked into the frightened fat face of War Gap's doctor.

"The killer rode over me!" Link yelled. "No use to go after him in this blasted storm, either. The snow hides things half the distance across the street. Where is the room that—"

The doctor led Link Torkaway into a small office. Long Hair Duval was

sprawled out on an old couch, his sightless eyes staring up at the ceiling. Blood trickled to the faded carpet. Link felt sick when he saw the cave-in at the side of Duval's head. The sheriff was sprawled on the floor.

MEN who had been alerted from the saloon by the shot and the shouting came running up the stairway and set up a great clattering. Pladwell barged in first. He stopped short and swore luridly.

"I was gettin' a little sleep when it happened," the doctor said. "Was up all last night and most of today. Colic case. Lew Munson's kid—"

"You just naturally asked 'em to do this, Pladwell," Link said coldly. "You knew Sheriff Olway wasn't to be trusted."

"Son, I never trusted him," the Open A owner said thickly. "Or Dutcher, either, or any of his men. But they've never done a cold-blooded killin' like this."

"They've started now," Link said grimly.

He took the lamp from its bracket and placed it near the couch where Duval lay. A chunk of snow that had come off a man's boot had not fully melted. Link examined every inch of the floor and finally spotted something near a bed caster. He picked it up and held it close to the lamp. The sheriff had his eyes open now, and Pladwell had Olway on his feet.

"Somebody come in and hit me," Olway choked out. "It was dark. I didn't get a good look at him. He walked like a cat or I'd have heard him. The doc had just stepped out to get a wink of sleep."

"Even if you'd seen him, Olway," Pladwell ground out acidly, "you wouldn't remember. What you got there, Smith?"

"A piece of Duval's skull, looks like," Link said, and pocketed the thing. "They sure wanted to make certain he wouldn't talk."

Pladwell whirled toward his men.

"Get goin' for the Open A. I ain't makin' the try in this storm. I'll stay in town here at the hotel."

"Some coyotes want to cover up more'n just a fire," Link bit out. "You don't hang a man for that. I'll go over to the hotel with you, Pladwell."

The big stove in the lobby glowed redly when old John Pladwell and Link Torkaway dropped into chairs beside it.

"I've been doin' a heap of thinkin' every minute I've been in this town, Pladwell," Link said. "About a certain brand. Seems it's the Open A that's been takin' most of the lickin' in the valley. Ever have a grudge against Buck Thorne?"

"Not ever," Pladwell denied. "We were plumb good friends till Al Dutcher took over the foreman's job at the Rafter K. He's changed Buck, broke the man to his will. It's a gun outfit now."

"The Open A," Link mused, his eyes speculative. "That's a big V turned upside-down, huh? A runnin' iron in a slick, practiced hand could draw a line at the bottom of the Open A and it makes a Triangle. Then you draw a D in the middle. Easy brand to change, Pladwell."

Pladwell let the front legs of his tipped-back chair hit the floor with a bang.

"Triangle D? Yeah, I see it now. You mean Schrader is cuttin' into my herd?"

"Or somebody who controls the Triangle D," Link said, his eyes half closed. "Somebody who wants the Open A bad. They've been tryin' to run you out. Maybe Schrader wants to expand. Pladwell, I know a lot about cows. I wasn't always a footloose jigger. This is a made-to-order play, Pladwell. It's been done before. It was worked to a fare-thee-well up in Montana."

"Schrader was never nothin' but a shiftless cuss, Smith," Pladwell said. "No ambition. He ain't got the courage to run a fight against me alone."

"I kind of upset a gent's digestion by ridin' over the Laramie on a baldfaced bay, Pladwell," Link grinned, but made no immediate explanation. "How long has Buck Thorne ranched in this country?"

"Nine years."

Link spat against the hot stove to watch it sizzle. "Only one way to fight Dutcher and his crowd," he finally observed. "Get some gunslingers of your own."

"Fifteen or twenty years back, I

would've, son," the Open A owner said wearily. "But I'm an old man, Smith, and don't like the sight of spilled blood no more. Peace is what I want. Dutcher knows that."

CHAPTER V

Daring Plan

TORKAWAY sat there by the stove for a while sifting his thoughts.

The wind shouldered against the frame building and made it creak and tremble.

"Has that girl, Beth Calhoun, been seein' Dutcher?" he at last inquired idly.

"Reckon so. Ain't natural, Smith. There's been plenty of young men tryin' to beat Dutcher's time but they got nowheres. But she don't like Al, son. She's afraid of him."

He walked over to the desk, roused the night man, and got his key.

"I never answered another of your questions, Smith," Pladwell said, yawning. "There's a place for you at the Open A."

"I'll talk with Buck Thorne first," Link said.

Going to his room, Link pulled down the shades and sat down in the dark. He was not sleepy, but wide-awake instead. After a thoughtful moment or so a laugh rolled off his lips. It was a bitter one, devoid of mirth. In one night in War Gap, he had found out all he had to know. For he knew where he could lay his hands on Bill Calhoun who was very much alive!

The man had recognized him in the saloon. And for a moment there, in Bill Calhoun's eyes had been a light of rebellion. Then fear had crept into them when Dutcher had taken the play away from him.

A knock came at the door. Link crossed the room slowly, keeping out of line with the door. There was still time for another killing in War Gap. Link reached out and turned the key in the lock.

"Come in," he said, his hand slapping against the stock of his gun.

A man's head was thrust in through the door. It was the head of the sleepy night man.

"Smith? You there?"

"Yeah."

"Somebody wants you, Smith. She's waitin' out on the porch."

"She?" Link cried. "Reckon it can only be—"

He went out, shoving the little man aside. He walked softly along the hall and down the stairway. Across the lobby and out into the night he strolled.

He saw a figure huddled against the side of the hotel.

"You?" Link called softly. "Out here on such a night. Ma'am, you'll catch your death of cold."

"Link," Beth Calhoun said.

Link Torkaway felt a numbness go through him. His heart pounded until he could feel a dull ache in his temples. He had thought she had not recognized him, but she had.

"All right, Beth. All right."

He put his arm around her as though it was the natural thing to do, and he walked with her along the sidewalk until they came to where a sign screeched in the wind. They went into a small areaway next to the dry goods store.

Beth opened a side door and took Link into her living quarters in the rear of the store.

A lamp, with wick turned low, was burning. Heat issued from a small stove. The girl took off her coat, sat down in a chair and looked up at Link.

"He knew you," Beth Calhoun said. "He knows why you're here."

Her eyes were lifeless, and there was stark resignation in her voice.

"My guess was right then," Link said. "Beth, it's been a long time. I never forgot you."

"No, the Torkaways don't forget," Beth said with bitterness. "They followed us around until they found us. The law means more to the Torkaways than any other thing. How did you know where we were?"

Link told her.

"I wouldn't have come if Dad had been able to do it himself" he concluded. "He's crippled as you know, Beth. He had to be sure about Bill Calhoun. I had to take on his job, but I'm not the lawman Sam Torkaway was."

"What's the use of playing cat and mouse, Link?" Beth asked in a small tight voice. "Why put it off for a few days, a few weeks? Dad told me who you were just after you had the trouble with Dutcher, though I already knew. Dad felt like killing you."

"Lookin' at you now," Link said grimly, "I kind of wish Dutcher had been quicker."

"You're Sam Torkaway's son," Beth said. "You'll take my father back."

"I promised," Link said. He fought against a warning his father had given him—not to let anything stand in the way of duty. "But I'm not sure if I could have kept my promise. Anyway, I know now I don't figure to take Bill Calhoun back."

BETH got to her feet and her eyes began to shine. She put her hands on Link's shoulders. She was so close to him that he could breathe the perfume of her hair.

"Link, you've got a heart," she said. "When I saw you out there last night, I had a strange longing to go back with you and nobody ever need to know about Dad. Let him stay, Link."

He did not want to think of anything but her at the moment. He wanted the world to stand still and stay that way so he could always hold onto this girl. He could feel her trembling in his arms. Her lips were close and he kissed her.

Beth cried a little.

"If things were only different, Link!" she murmured forlornly. "If there was no Al Dutcher. If—Link, you must go away! Al Dutcher won't forget what you did to him. He's a killer, Link!"

"Yeah—like they said Bill Calhoun was," Link ground out. "I always figured your father was innocent. I'm goin' to stay right here and make sure of it."

Link felt Beth go weak. He eased her into her chair and looked down at her.

"Like you said, Beth," he told her firmly. "Why wait a day or a week or a month? I won't wait for Al Dutcher to make his move. I'll go and see him. And Buck Thorne."

"The roads to the Rafter K will be watched," Beth said in a cold, dead voice. "You can't go, Link."

"Got to. It's the chance I have to take. There's more to this job than just satisfying an old man's whim. I'm thinkin' of somebody who wants to control this cattle country, who will smash small owners into the ground, and who's got to be smashed first himself."

"Dad will go without a fight," Beth said. "He told me so. But it's the end of everything for me—just when it was beginning."

Before he walked out and closed the door, Link said, "Maybe it's still the beginning."

Link Torkaway stayed close to the hotel most of the day. It was Sunday and the streets were quiet. The temperature rose. Fine rain took the place of snow. When another night fell, there were great bare patches dotting the flats and slopes of the country around War Gap.

Time dragged. Few riders came into town and those who did stayed only briefly. Link saw none of Dutcher's men. He spent the entire day in absorbed thought, and an hour after he had had his supper, he had a plan rolling around in his head. It was one that would give him a fair chance to break through Dutcher's cordon of killers. He went over to the sheriff's office, and found Olway sitting there in the dark.

"Olway," Link said, "I want to borrow your horse. Anything happens to it, there's a bay in the stable to take its place. I want your hat and that buffalo skin shortcoat, too."

"Smith, you're takin' on a heap of authority in this town," Olway barked, and lifted his big frame out of his chair.

"Don't get spooky, Sheriff," Torkaway snapped. His gun hand groped into a

pocket of his woolen shirt. "Maybe you're not in so deep you can't crawl out. Here's my authority, Olway."

Olway swore when he saw a pale shard of light that came in through the half-open door strike against a star. He tipped the table over, and Link had to step back fast to get out of its way. And when the sheriff went for his gun Link knew that already he was in too deep in this Whispering Skull country land-grab he had figured out.

Link drew as he back-stepped. He threw a quick shot that sent Sheriff Olway tumbling. A cry of pain shook loose from the War Gap lawman's throat, and he fired off-balance, his bullet chugging into the wall wide of its mark.

"Drop that hogleg, Olway," Link roared, "or I'll bed you down for keeps!"

Boots thumped outside. A man shouldered into the law office. Three more came at his heels.

"All right, Smith—all right," Olway choked out.

Torkaway was against the wall where the darkness was thick.

"Take it easy, you jiggers," he called. "I'm takin' Olway's job over for tonight. I got a badge of my own, and it wasn't never used to back up a bunch of stock thieves and killers. I'm borrowin' Olway's bronc for a while. Also his coat and his hat."

"Smith," a low voice said.

A MAN just inside the door struck a match and held the sputtering flame aloft. A groan came from the sheriff huddled under the window. Torkaway recognized faces in the semi-dark, saw that it was the War Gap blacksmith who held the match. There was the tall, gaunt man who ran the express office, and just behind him were two punchers Link did not know.

"Give him what he wants!" Olway forced out. "I'm dead sick of it. Was a fool to make that play. Let him clean out Dutcher's bunch—if he can."

When a lamp was lit, Link held his badge out for everybody to see.

"You aim to go up against that salty bunch alone, feller?" the smith inquired.

"Yeah," Link said. "Get the sheriff to a doctor."

He whirled and went racing across the street to the livery stable.

A few moments later he rode out of War Gap at a pounding run. It was near midnight. He was astride a black horse, and he wore Olway's buffalo coat and flat-crowned black hat.

Three miles from town he took a trail that headed from the stage road, and lifted toward the hills. The sheriff's horse seemed to know instinctively its rider's destination and Link Torkaway grinned.

A thin mist boiled up out of the thawing earth and blotted out landmarks fifty feet ahead. The country kept rising and breaking. Link came down off a hogback to enter the deep slash of a canyon and his black bronc picked out a clear way of descent. The horse splashed through a creek and came out on a well-traveled path that brought them to a stretch of thick woods.

In the depths of the woods was the faint glow of a fire. Link skirted the timber, the bed of pine needles muffling his approach. The trail dropped to lower ground and the woods gave way before a wide meadow. A hundred yards further on, trees stretched across the trail again. In their shadows, there was movement, the creak of saddle leather and the jingling of bit chains.

"It's Olway," a rough voice said. "Sheriff, is that jigger still in town?"

Five horsemen loomed up to block Link Torkaway's path.

"Yeah," he growled, and tried to ride on.

Quickly a horse swung close to his black, and he caught the smell of cheap tobacco and whisky as a face was shoved close to his own. Link saw eyes slowly widen, lips draw away from broken yellow teeth. He smashed that face with the back of his hand, and the man swayed in his kak.

Instantly Link wheeled his mount. A gun flamed and a bullet slammed into his

side, lifting him half-way out of the saddle. He bounced back against the cantle, then charged straight toward the gunmen blocking the trail. Muzzle light bloomed in his face. Lead whispered past his head. Then his own guns were bucking, roaring.

He saw one hull emptied before he bolted straight through those gunmen who broke in confusion before his wild charge.

CHAPTER VI

Bullet Showdown

RACING away in the clear, Link twisted around, threw three shots, and heard a roaring yell of pain.

The black under him had plenty of bottom, and Link Torkaway laughed his sudden panic away. Again Olway's horse was following the beaten path, seemed to know where it was going. Link holstered his Colt and dragged the rifle from its boot. He kept throwing lead behind at the pursuing horsemen, and thought he heard another wild scream.

Wood smoke began to cling to the wind as Torkaway skirted a meadow and saw a big bowl-like depression through which a wide stream ran rapidly, setting up a musical clatter. Backed up against the far side of the bowl was a big frame ranchhouse, and lights burned in its windows. The Rafter K.

As Torkaway rode through the gate he saw a big rectangle of light appear in the long bunkhouse.

"Looks like Olway!" somebody yelled.

There was a rapid drum-roll of hoofs back of him on the meadow when Link cantered up to the ranchhouse and threw himself out of the saddle. He crossed a wide porch, opened the door, and went in without knocking. From the ranch yard came voices thick and strident with rage.

Dutcher got up from a backless chair near an iron stove.

"Sheriff, what—" His jaw swung loosely. "Smith!"

"Take it easy, Al," Torkaway said. "Them jiggers howlin' out there tried to give me the right kind of welcome. Nice of you, Dutcher."

Dutcher's evil eyes narrowed. His lips moved but they made no sound. Buck Thorne got up from his chair slowly. In his rugged face the lines seemed to deepen.

"Keep your wolves out of here, Dutcher," Torkaway said and kept his eyes flat on Thorne. "Maybe I've changed my mind about this outfit."

"Sit down," Dutcher said. "Start talkin', Smith. Be careful what you say if you ever want to walk out of here."

"I came here to the Whisperin' Skull country after a man," Link said.

He threw his badge onto a table. The stillness that settled over the room was nerve-grating.

"Meanin'?" Dutcher's thick brows lifted.

"Should've searched me better out on the Laramie," Link said. "I mean Flat-nose and Long Hair Duval. You was told about that, Dutcher? You're a big jigger hereabouts to be just a foreman. Seems that Buck Thorne was a mighty sociable hombre before you took over the Rafter K, too. So let's start addin' up, Dutcher. You planned to have me bushwhacked if I showed up here, and a little while ago your men tried it, but Olway's bronc and his duds fooled 'em. You ain't after my hide for what I did to you in War Gap. You're afraid I might've come to take a gent from under your boots—and you need that hombre in your business. His name used to be Bill Calhoun."

Dutcher's big body tensed, and he slid his tongue along lips that had become dry.

"All right, Link," Buck Thorne growled. "I'm admittin' it. I reckon Beth has talked to you."

Dutcher seemed bewildered. His nails seemed to be trying to gouge wood out of the edge of the table. Link signaled to Thorne with his eyes.

"A man come to the Whispering Skull some time ago and recognized Bill Calhoun," Link droned on. "He started squeezin' that man, Dutcher. He started givin' orders on this outfit himself because

he knew Calhoun was a wanted man. You're that snake, Dutcher! You wanted Calhoun's girl, too, thought you could get her by holding Calhoun's liberty as a club over her head. You've also got a lot of Open A cows out on the Laramie. You—"

At that instant Buck Thorne—Bill Calhoun—saw the faces at the window. He yelled at Link and pitched toward the wall. Link saw Dutcher's hand strike and went for his gun just as Calhoun pivoted and threw two shots at the window.

Glass tinkled and a man went down out there on the porch, yelling and cursing. Torkaway's .44 had leaped from its holster in time with Dutcher's. Its crashing roar filled the room. Dutcher's bullet spun Link around, but in that position the young lawman whipped a shot at the door. He caught one glimpse of a pocked face and a flat nose the instant before he heard his bullet tear through the hired gunslinger.

Bill Calhoun stood in the gunsmoke, pouring his fire into the door and windows. When his Colt was empty he threw it away, snatched up a rifle, and tipped a heavy table over for a barricade.

AL DUTCHER was trying to get a smashed leg under him, his teeth grinding against the pain of it. He swiveled his sixgun toward Link Torkaway, tossing a slug that went wild. Link threw his own weapon into Dutcher's twisted face. The foreman pitched backward and sprawled on the floor. He lay there screeching through his broken mouth.

"All right, Link?" Calhoun yelled.

The lawman from Palmer fought nausea and thumbed another shot at the door with Dutcher's gun. Out in the yard there was no more firing.

"Hold it in there!" a man outside roared. "It's Curly, Buck! Dutcher's gunmen have got enough."

The Rafter K puncher broke into the room and caught at Link Torkaway.

"I'm all right," Link said. "Calhoun, how're you makin' it?"

"Never felt better, son." Bill Calhoun laughed. "You and Sam there make a pair, Link."

Link looked down at Dutcher. Blood poured out of the man's smashed leg and out of his shoulder. His face was a bloody wreck.

"Do somethin'!" he choked out. "I'm bleedin' bad."

Link Torkaway took a jack-knife out of his pocket, and ripped Dutcher's overalls just above the knee.

"Make a tourniquet, Bill," he instructed. "We've got to save this hellion. Give me your neck rag. Wait! He's been shot in the leg before. Look at this old bullet wound, Calhoun."

He and Bill Calhoun stared at the pulpy white flesh on Dutcher's leg, three inches below the new wound. The picture was plain. An old picture that the Torkaways had never put out of their heads.

"Think back, Bill," Link said quickly. "You shot a man when you was gettin' out of Palamar that night. Funny, that cowhand was up so late that night." He glowered down at the wounded foreman. "Dutcher, you killed a gambler named Kregg in Palamar. You was gettin' his money when you heard Calhoun comin'. You ducked fast—"

"Yeah?" Dutcher sneered with effort. "I don't reckon you'll ever prove that ag'in me. Tie that leg up, cuss your eyes!"

"Tie it tight, Calhoun," Link said. "We can't let this skunk bleed to death."

Sam Torkaway's son took a little piece of bone out of his pocket. He went over and picked up Dutcher's empty .44 that lay against the wall. He brought it back and held it up in front of Dutcher's pain-clouded eyes.

"Look, Al," Torkaway said icily. "This little piece of bone fits perfect—right here on the handle. I found that sliver right beside the couch where they'd put Long Hair Duval. Seemed you favor breakin' skulls. Don't make so much noise as burnin' powder, huh? You had to make sure of Long Hair. Besides, it had to be a man the sheriff knew who walked up them stairs and got into the doc's office. Duval went to work for you on the Laramie after you shook him loose from the Rafter K where that stolen Open A stock is.

Schrader was only a dummy owner of the Triangle D, Dutcher."

Al Dutcher glared up at Torkaway. His eyes betrayed his guilt, but his broken mouth forced out words that again asked the young sheriff to prove it.

"Easy, Dutcher," Link ground out. "Folks in War Gap saw me get that piece of bone. Now, Al, you can go back to Palamar and confess to killin' Kregg or you can stand trial here. Might have a chance to beat a rope in Palamar. Sam Torkaway might feel kind of lenient toward you seein' as how it didn't turn out to be Bill Calhoun that killed that gambler."

Al Dutcher cursed and banged his fists against the floor.

"I'll take the ride to Palamar," he finally forced out.

"Tell your men to harness up a team, Calhoun, and get Dutcher to a doctor," Link ordered, and leaned heavily against Calhoun's shoulder. "How did he get wise to you, Bill?"

"Caught me one night in War Gap," Calhoun said, "holdin' Beth in my arms. That sign over her store gave the snap away. Everythin's all right now, ain't it, Link? I ain't dreamin' none? Here I've been hatin' the Torkaways, and one of 'em's my salvation!"

Young Torkaway's head was light and Calhoun's voice seemed a mile away.

"Yeah, it's the beginning, and not the end—Beth."

Link's knees sagged and he dropped to the floor. . . .

WHEN he returned to consciousness, he stared up at a great patch of cracked ceiling, wondering where he was. A voice hummed through his clearing brain.

"A salty cuss, Beth. Cracked this Dutcher and his wild bunch wide open in less'n two days. A Torkaway, huh? I might of known 'cause I knew his father."

"He's awake," a soft voice said. "His fever's gone."

Link knew that voice and he knew whose hand it was that rested on his forehead. He rolled his head to the side and grinned at Beth. Then he saw her father and John Pladwell and a group of Rafter K punchers.

"Dutcher?" Link said to Calhoun.

"Locked up," Calhoun said. "Him and the sheriff. Dutcher won't be able to ride for a spell yet. Open A riders have brought Schrader in, and some of 'em are on their way to the Laramie to get that beef. Figure you'll want to take Dutcher back to Palamar, Link?"

"Wouldn't let nobody else," Link declared, and tried to sit up.

Beth shook her head and pressed him back against the pillow.

"I'll need a good man here on the Rafter K," Calhoun said. "Think you'll be comin' back, son?"

Link put a big hand over one of Beth Calhoun's.

He felt her hand tremble.

"I'd better if I don't want to get myself shot," Link said. "Because if it's all right with a certain party, I'll have a wife waitin' here for me."

Bill Calhoun turned to the men in the room.

"Get out of here, you jugheads. Don't you have no manners? My girl has to answer that, and she don't want no audience."

Old John Pladwell moved away, chuckling.

"I already know the answer," he said, grinning. "Nobody ever gets away from the Torkaways."

Read SMUGGLERS' RANCH, a Punch-Packed Steve Reese Novel by Walker A. Tompkins, in September Range Riders Western—Only 20c!

LOOK AHEAD — HORSE THIEF

Flask's heart leaped as he saw the smoke

By CY KEES

FLASK SWEENEY jerked his sweat-streaked pinto to a skidding stop and cocked his ear. That was no animal, he thought, listening intently. At least none that he'd ever heard. He waited, motionless, hearing only the wind rustling through the scrub pine timber and the steady flow of Boulder Creek.

There it was again! It came clearly yet gave the impression of coming from a great distance. It sounded almost like . . . Flask shook his head. What would a kid be doing in this wilderness? A thought struck him, and he pressed spurs to the pinto.

The wagon trains. It could be someone

An Old Outlaw Finds a Child in the Wilderness!

lost from the wagon trains. Flask let his horse pick its way toward the jumbled maze of brush siding Boulder Creek. It braced its front legs taking careful, skidding steps down the precipitous slope. On the canyon floor, he urged the pinto to a faster pace, wishing the sound would be repeated.

Keeping a sharp lookout through the maze of willows, he spotted a flash of red near the rumbling creek. Instantly he reined to a stop and stared in disbelief. A little girl was sitting on a rock busily surveying one of her hands. While he slipped from the saddle, she plucked a thorn from the tiny hand and brushed it as if trying to remove the hurt.

Fascinated, Flask tiptoed closer. One of his scuffed boots snapped a twig. She started and looked up.

"Beg pardon." Embarrassed, Flask yanked his tattered hat from his head. Her deep blue eyes widened. Remembering that he hadn't combed his bushy grey hair for more than a week, he clamped the hat back on.

"Howdy do," he said tentatively, trying to shape his weatherbeaten, whiskery face into a kindly expression. "You kinda get lost or somethin'?"

She got up, brushing her miniature denim pants carefully. "No, but I'm hungry," she said in a tinkling voice. "You got anything to eat—please?"

Flask moved quickly to the saddlebags on his horse. "I sure have," he said eagerly, glad to be of help. He unwrapped pieces of grouse he had saved from breakfast and some cold biscuits.

She took them gravely, and a look of gratitude flashed over her cute, freckled face. She ate delicately with small, mincing bites. Burning with curiosity, Flask waited impatiently until she was through. He cleared his throat.

"You're not here alone," he ventured. "Where's your folks?"

SHE waved her hand in a vague circle. "Over there," she said. "We're going to Or-e-gon. You ever been there?"

"Can't say as I have," Flask answered. He scratched his head in wonderment. She didn't seem to mind at all being alone.

She sighed. "Well, I guess I better go back. Mommy'll worry if I don't."

Flask jerked his thumb towards his waiting horse. "You just ride along with me," he said. "You can make better time than walkin'."

She agreed. She rode fearlessly in the front of the saddle, sometimes reaching forward trying to pet the pinto's neck. She told him her name was Karen Day, that she like horses—if they didn't buck—and that she wished the trip was over because the wagon bounced. When Flask told her his name, she said she would call him Uncle Flask until they reached the wagons.

Flask rode comfortably slouched, wistfully wishing that the ride could last forever. He steadied her with one hand on the back of her red shirt. Nobody had ever needed or wanted his protection before, he thought. He winced, feeling keenly the loneliness that he'd always taken as a matter of course.

Karen gazed back at him. "Are you a cowboy, Uncle Flask?" she asked.

"Well, not exactly," Flask hedged, suddenly ashamed of his past life. "I do a little of this'n a little of that."

Her deep blue eyes shone. "Oh, a jack of all trades," she said, carefully forming the words.

"Yeah, that's it," Flask muttered, knowing they didn't consider cards, salting mines and horse thieving as trades. He felt warm blood flooding his face and cursed silently. Why did she have to look at him so close?

"We came through Beargrass last," Karen went on innocently. "You ever been there?"

Flask flinched. Been there. He'd left so fast the tailing posse couldn't see him for clouds of dust. He pretended to study the lay of the land and ignored the question.

Karen pressed her hand against his horse's rippling muscles. "I met a nice lady there," she said. "Her name's Ma Peters."

Flask smiled at her approvingly. "A fine lady," he agreed.

"I met a nice man there too," she continued. "Almost as nice as you. His name's Judge Chis-elring."

Flask stiffened and peered at her closely.

"He's not nice," he said a trifle peevishly. "He's an old billy goat. A bullheaded old billy goat."

Karen gasped, then haughtily raised her snub nose and pouted. Flask grinned —hastily trying to undo the damage he had done to their friendship. She looked away. Sighing, he glanced up and saw the distant, billowing clouds of smoke rising over the thick pines that blocked his view.

Heart pounding, he drew the pinto to the side of the trail and stopped. It might be some greenhorn let the fire get away, he thought hopefully, and dreaded to think of what it might be. He remembered the reports of stray bands of Blackfeet in the area and scowled.

Karen looked at him questioningly. He pulled into a thicket and dismounted. Carefully stepping into the open, he looked closely over the surrounding area. Nothing moved. Everything seemed serene except that smoke curling ominously over the pines.

Flask slipped back into the thicket. Karen was hanging from the saddlehorn trying to get a foothold in the stirrup. Gently he lifted her down. Standing back, he scratched his grizzled head, wondering what he should say so she wouldn't be scared.

She looked up at him, an earnest expression on her freckled face. "Aren't you going any farther?" she asked in a disappointed voice.

"Soon as I find out where you're supposed to go," Flask said desperately. "My horse gets tired carryin' two, so you got to stay right here till I come back and get you."

Karen hesitated, then flashed her cute smile. "Okay," she said cheerfully. "Don't take too long."

Quickly Flask mounted. "I'll hurry right back," he promised. "You be sure and stay right there."

FLASK headed down Boulder creek which angled towards the columns of smoke. Riding steadily, he cleared the masking clumps of trees, and jerked to a stop, hot blood pounding to his head. Groaning he stood up in the stirrups and watched, fear almost paralyzing him.

Below where Boulder creek dropped in savage spurts and falls, wagons were burning fiercely. Blackfeet pranced crazily around, mutilating still forms. Others were banding the scattered livestock together—looting the doomed wagon train. Over the still air, Flask could faintly hear shrill cries of the victorious braves.

Flask slumped wearily back in the saddle. Somewhere in that carnage, he knew, Karen's parents would be lying, helpless or dead. Bitterly Flask cursed his own helplessness. There was nothing he could do. Nothing except . . .

A wild, bloodthirsty whoop sounded almost at his elbow. Five braves shot out of the timber and rushed him. Instinctively, he dug spurs into his horse. It sprang frantically away, temporarily leaving the savages behind. Scouts, he thought furiously, I should've known. Ducked low in the saddle, Flask pounded back up Boulder creek. Nearing the thicket where he had left Karen, sudden, chilling fear struck him.

What if Karen, hearing the approaching hoofbeats walked into the open? Gritting his teeth, Flask tore the pinto's head around, plunging him through the treacherous waters of Boulder creek. As the water deepened, he pulled his pistol and held it up. An arrow hissed past and bounced crazily from a rock. Flask snapped a shot at an aiming brave, and watched the horse collapse under him.

Flask's horse reached the opposite bank and scrambled into the sheltering timber. Stunned with surprise, Flask saw that they were not going to cross the creek. With one horse carrying double, they raced back toward the scene of the massacre.

"Scared they'll miss somethin'," Flask grated angrily. He relaxed in the saddle, relieved that they didn't want to take up the chase. He waited a long time, watching vigilantly for any sign of their return.

Cautiously he slipped from the brush, quietly forded the creek and returned to where he had left Karen. He spied her peeking out of the thicket, a worried set to her freckled face. She saw him and her face lighted joyfully.

"Will you take me back now?" she asked anxiously.

Sadness crept through Flask leaving him cold, but he forced a smile. "You're supposed to come with me," he lied desperately. "Your folks said you could stay in Beargrass till they get a nice place picked out. I'm supposed to take you back."

Karen peered at him closely, a faintly skeptical look on her face. "Are you sure that's what they said?"

Flask smiled again. "Sure. They just told me—said you didn't like the bouncin' wagon."

Karen brightened. "I don't either," she agreed heartily and came forward. Flask lifted her to her seat in the front of the saddle. He cupped her protectively with his left hand, and kept a sharp eye on the backtrail.

AT DUSK they stopped and shared part of his dwindling supply of food. Karen nodded sleepily before she could finish. Wishing he had some spare bedding, he unrolled the mackinaw he carried and tucked it tenderly around her. "Can I stay with Ma Peters when we get there?" she murmured drowsily.

Flask smiled thoughtfully. "That's just where I hoped you'd want to stay," he told her, thankful that she hadn't suggested Judge Chiselring. He grinned ruefully, knowing it was his ways that had aroused the hostility of the judge.

He gazed down on the peacefully sleeping child, wondering what he ought to do. They'd get him unless he was careful sneaking back into town. He shook his head disgustedly, knowing he had overstepped when he'd stolen Jud Zimmerman's horses. At least, he figured, he should have waited till night so they couldn't have recognized him.

"All dang crowbaits anyhow," he muttered to himself. "Jud needed those horses about like I need the blind staggers, but he won't rest till they get me."

Grunting from the stiffness of his aging legs, he sat down, hovering near the sleeping form like a cluck hen over a lone chick.

Flask kept a sharp eye peeled on the surrounding darkness. The Blackfeet wouldn't pass this way, he was sure, but he resolved not to take any chances. Absently he rolled a smoke, wishing he could do some things over. Like working for a living so he could be proud to tell Karen what he did. And maybe buy her some pretty presents. Sadly he cupped his whiskery chin in his hands.

Time passed slowly in the darkness, and he roused himself from dozing. "You just see she gets safe with Ma Peters," he told himself sternly. "And get out fast before she finds out what you're like."

Karen stirred uneasily, and Flask slipped to her side. Relief stole over her features, and she stared trustingly up at him. "I dreamed you went away," she said softly.

Flask smoothed the blond hair back from her forehead with a rough hand. "You just go back to sleep," he said soothingly. "I wouldn't leave you a minute for a hunnert dollars." Smiling faintly, Karen closed her eyes. Through the long night he guarded. At regular intervals, he cursed himself for his shiftlessness.

The morning sky was as blue as Karen's eyes, Flask noted gaily as he saddled up. She flitted about the camp cheerfully, chattering endlessly.

"Aren't you hungry, Uncle Flask?" she asked wide-eyed when he gave her the few remaining provisions.

"No, I ate before you woke up," he lied blandly, coaxing the pinto to take its bit. "Did I leave you enough?"

"Uh-huh," she said, chewing vigorous-

ly. "Uncle Flask, why don't you like Judge Chis-elring?"

Flask grinned. "I was just kiddin' you yesterday," he said casually. "Judge Chiselring and me are old friends." Relief filtered through him as she spied a flower to pluck and didn't go into the matter any deeper. He mounted and lifted her to her seat.

FROWNING, he wondered how he could slip into Beargrass without being spotted. Wanting the horse to be fresh for his escape, he let it pick its pace through the rugged hill country surrounding the town. The sun beat with a welcome warmth after the fireless night.

With a grimace, Flask thought of the future cold nights he had to look forward to without the comforting presence of the little figure sitting so pertly in front of him. Suddenly his past life looked bleak and useless. He looked down at the small blond head and swallowed a dismal lump in his throat.

Flask steered cautiously away from the main road into Beargrass, taking the little used trail instead. He'd ride in the back way, he decided, and sneak in to Ma Peters' house on the edge of town. Once she had Karen, he could get out fast. Karen smiled up, and the thought of going away sickened him.

The timber thinned, and Flask eyed the town of Beargrass. Surveying it closely, he saw there was very little activity around the town. Three horses were standing in front of the Rock Hole saloon, his favorite hangout. Karen talked steadily, pointing out places she knew with a tiny, tanned finger. Flask sighted over it and nodded, trying to find excuses to delay going in. Karen dropped her hand back on the saddlehorn and was silent. Sighing in resignation, Flask urged the pinto forward.

Easing through the back streets, Flask watched narrowly for any sign of activity. Nobody challenged him, and soon he pulled up at the front yard of Ma Peters' house. She bustled out of the door, surprise written on her wrinkled, kindly face.

"Why—why it's little Karen!" she exclaimed rushing forward. Her smile faded somewhat, and she looked up at Flask. "Where are her parents?"

Anxiously, Flask bared his teeth in a warning signal. "They asked me to bring her here till they can come and pick her up," he said with a broad wink. He dismounted and carried Karen inside of the house.

"Just like I want our kitchen to be," Karen said jubilantly, gazing in admiration at the spotless room.

Feeling suddenly awkward, Flask edged towards the door. "Guess I'll be hittin' out now," he mumbled. He grabbed the doorknob and froze, listening. Stealthy footsteps padded outside.

A brief look of fright passed over Ma Peters' face. "You go out the back door," she whispered urgently.

Flask hesitated and glanced at Karen. She was observing the scene with scared blue eyes. He stepped to the small, clean window and tensed. Wade Miller and his deputy, Joe Stevens! They were catfooting along the porch towards the door.

"Out the back—quick!" Ma Peters urged again.

Sorrowfully Flask shook his head. "There might be some shootin' then," he said in a low tone. "It'd scare her somethin' fierce."

He hurried the old lady and Karen out of the line of fire, and stepped from the door, hands raised.

Sheriff Wade Miller started with such sheer surprise that he almost dropped his gun. His eyes narrowed and he jumped behind Flask, evidently suspecting some trick. Flask felt his guns being ripped from his holsters.

Deputy Joe Stevens scratched his head in plain bewilderment. "Now what in the hell made him give up?" he asked in a puzzled tone.

"Probably figured we'd nail him anyhow," Miller said proudly, as if the capture was a great victory for him.

Flask snorted. "Danged if that's so," he sneered. "I watched you bumble around for three hours at the Meadows

tryin' to pick up my trail. I was watchin' all the time from that rock outcropping up on the bluff. Hell, a blind man could outsmart deadheads like you even if his hearin'—"

"Get going," Miller snapped and jabbed a gun in his back sharply for emphasis. Indignantly Flask whirled and saw Karen standing silently beside the sturdy figure of Ma Peters. Eyes downcast, he went peaceably.

HOPELESSLY Flask stewed and fretted in the cell for two days. Karen came often with Ma Peters and brought him tobacco. Once she came close to his cell and whispered, "I saw Judge Chiselring, and I told him you was nice and he should let you go." For her sake, Flask smiled as if it was welcome news.

"Fat lot've good that'll do," he muttered disconsolately while he whittled a stick. "He hasn't forgotten how I took him to camp in that card game. By gum, he still owes me thirty-five dollars. Dang near swallered his chew when I edged him outta that pat hand."

On the morning of the third day, Sheriff Miller took him from the cell. They walked silently through a milling throng of people to the courthouse. It was jammed. Old friends yelled at him jovially, but Flask looked straight ahead. He wished heartily it was over, win or lose.

His lawyer came up and solemnly introduced himself. Flask eyed the gaunt figure up and down, seeing nothing to encourage him. The prosecutor walked jauntily down the aisle, a victory light shining in his eyes. He looked at Flask speculatively as if sizing him up for the kill. Glum with despair, Flask sat down wearily in the chair his lawyer pointed out.

A hush arose and the crowd rumbled to their feet as Judge Chiselring entered. Everyone but Flask. He stayed sitting, and sniffed disdainfully at the bench. When the time came, he pleaded not guilty as his lawyer directed.

Soon growing weary of the proceedings, Flask dozed in his chair until a bony elbow jammed his ribs. His lawyer glowered warningly at him. The jury was seated, and the prosecutor was reading the charges. Flask looked the jury over and saw Jody Gendry in one of the back seats. The sight of the familiar face cheered him, and he straightened up with renewed interest.

The prosecutor finished reading the charges. Obviously reluctant to give up the spotlight, he launched into a reading of Flask's past record.

"Get on with the case," Judge Chiselring rasped from the bench. "We don't need to be told he's the orneriest critter that ever plagued an honest town."

Flask's lawyer rose sharply, but Flask yanked him back in his seat. "Let the old he boar grunt," he said, not trying to keep his voice down. "He's just jealous 'cause I whipped him at draw poker."

Snickers rippled over the courtroom. Judge Chiselring banged his gavel viciously and glared down at Flask. The judge's face quivered, and he turned back to the prosecutor with an obvious effort.

SOMEONE hissed cautiously from behind Flask, and he inched his head around to see who it was. Karen was sitting in the front seat beside Ma Peters, hushing him with one finger crossed over her lips. He noted gladly the cleanly washed face, the fresh dress and neatly combed hair. He had picked the right place for her, he decided with satisfaction. Karen smiled at him and winked.

Feeling better again, Flask crossed his eyes, pulled his ears and stuck out his tongue, simultaneously. Karen giggled and squirmed in her chair. Looking over his shoulder, she sobered instantly and began to signal him frantically with her deep blue eyes.

Flask swiveled in his chair and glanced casually toward the bench. Judge Chiselring seemed to be in pain. His face was a mottled red, and his head was tucked into his shoulders like a bald eagle fearful of being robbed of its nest.

"That'll cost you exactly twenty dollars," he roared. "Contempt of court! One

more monkeyshine like that and it'll be fifty!"

Whew, Flask thought, straightening, that could add up. He tilted the chair back, listening to the hum of voices, wishing they furnished a comfortable chair so he could get some rest. He knew the outcome of the case anyhow. They'd caught him cold. Sweat trickled down his face from the stuffiness of the courtroom while his lawyer made his closing remarks. The jury filed out and he could read guilty in every one of their backs.

Flask sneaked a look at Karen. She brightened cheerfully as she caught his eye, but he had read the sadness in her face. She knew too.

Less than an hour later, the jury filed back in. Flask caught Jody Gendry's eye and looked inquiringly. Jody glanced away, avoiding his gaze.

Judge Chiselring asked him to stand, and Flask shuffled to his feet feeling awkward. The horsefaced foreman cleared his throat industriously.

"We find the defendant guilty as charged," he droned in a funereal voice.

A gasp went over the courtroom followed by protesting murmurs. Flask flopped back in his seat, wishing he hadn't stood at all. Karen hissed from behind him trying to get his attention. Shame swept him and he ignored her. Convicted of being a horse thief. He stared at the floor, waiting for the sentence.

"Will the defendant please come up to the bench," Judge Chiselring said over the buzzing in the courtroom.

Curious, Flask went up. Chiselring stared at him searchingly. "What happened to the child's parents?" he asked.

Flask glanced cautiously towards Karen, seeing that she was a safe distance away. "Blackfeet got 'em out near Twenty Mile on Boulder creek," he said, keeping his voice low. "She wandered away from camp and—"

"Yes, I heard all that," the Judge interrupted. "About twenty times from twenty different people. For once it seems you done something decent—something unselfish and good. Against my better judgment, I'm going to give you a chance to keep doing it. You know Ma Peters has a hard enough time earning a living without any extras. Well, you're going to get a job and see what you can do to help."

New hope flooding him, Flask leaned forward waiting tensely.

Judge Chiselring slid a piece of paper forward. "Here's a contract with Joe Castry for some rock hauling." Flask noticed his eyes glittering with the same light that always gave away his good poker hands.

"It's hard work—very hard work," the judge continued triumphantly. "But I think that's just what you need to take the meanness out of you. Now sign this and get back there. And if you step out of line just once, you'll be back here so fast, you'll think you been here all along."

In a daze, Flask signed and walked back to his chair. Judge Chiselring arose and faced the courtroom.

"I hereby sentence the defendant to fifteen years—sentence suspended and the prisoner released to the custody of Miss Karen Day." He banged the gavel. "The spectators will remain seated until they are clear of the courtroom." He smiled. "Now, Karen," he said kindly.

Astonished, Flask turned. Karen rushed towards him with a tremulous smile. Numb with happiness, Flask let her take his hand. Head held proudly erect, she led him down the aisle, pulling him along with her tiny hand.

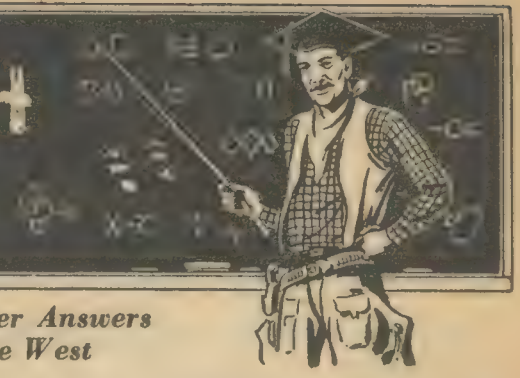
Karen reached the door and screwed it open. Freckled face glowing, she stepped back to let him through first. Flask realized she wouldn't be so happy if she knew what had happened to her parents, but she could be told about that later.

"That twenty dollars for contempt of court," Judge Chiselring boomed. "It'll come out of your first check."

Gleefully, Flask looked back. "Take it outta the poker bill you owe me," he retorted. "It's the only way you'll get it."

He scooped Karen up on his shoulder, stepped out and firmly closed the door of the courtroom.

SAGEBRUSH SAVVY



A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—I've been trying to think of the name of the western outlaw who urged a sheriff to hurry up and hang him so he wouldn't miss dinner in hell.—F. N. R. (Wyo.).

A.—Black Jack Ketchum, hanged at Clayton, N. M., April 26, 1901. When sentencing him, Judge Wm. J. Mills had asked if he had any last request to make and Black Jack had said: "Yes, I'm a purty good barber—I'd like to shave the district attorney!" On the morning of his execution he complained to Sheriff Saturnino Pinard that they'd better hurry or he wouldn't get to hell in time for dinner. He was hanged at 1 P. M. It turned out pretty gruesome, one of the few instances when the rope jerked the head off of its victim.

Q.—Are grizzly bears extinct in the United States?—D. W. (Maine).

A.—No, there are a few left in the Rocky Mountains of Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico.

Q.—Why don't cowboys ever ride the small, flat, English type of saddle? Couldn't they stay on a horse as well with it as fox hunters do?—L. J. D. (Pa.)

A.—There's a lot more to a cowboy's riding than just staying on the horse. He does his work in the saddle, and the western saddle is a piece of working gear designed for that purpose, with a horn to tie a rope to, shape and stirrups that give the cowboy a secure, easy seat in which he can vary his position as may be necessary and still leave both hands free for rope and reins. If he "posted" with the horse's gait, eastern style, on a forty mile ride he'd just about as well walk!

Q.—I read about cowboys carrying rifles called .30/30's. What do these numbers mean?—M. M. (R. I.).

A.—The first number indicates the caliber—thirty one-hundredths of an inch. The second indicates the thirty grain black powder load for which the .30/30 was originally designed. The name has stuck, though black powder is no longer used.

Q.—Was there ever a woman outlaw hanged in the west?—V. L. (New York).

A.—Yes, several, though I can recall the name of only one: Ella Watson, known as "Cattle Kate," in Wyoming, 1889.

Q.—I sometimes see calf ropers at rodeos riding mares. I thought cowboys never rode "lady hosses"?—R. B. S. (S. C.).

A.—In ranch work where cowhorses are handled in a herd or *remuda,* the rule is geldings only. Too much biting and kicking in any *remuda* where "lady hosses" are present. But wherever a cowboy can keep his mount more or less to itself, riding a mare or even a stallion often works all right.

Q.—My Spanish dictionary says "Amarillo" means "yellow" and is pronounced Ah-mah-REEL-yo, but on a trip west last summer, I found that folks around Amarillo, Texas call it Am-a-RILL-o or Am-a-RILL-a. Who's correct?—O. P. (Chicago).

A.—Your dictionary is right, of course, but the only workable practice for place names is to call 'em the same as the folks who live there do.

—S. Omar Barker.

TRADER'S BARGAIN

By WARREN BEAN

Peddler O'Hara brings the first Colt guns into Texas but his problem is keeping them out of scheming hands

WITH the brisk northwest breeze on his starboard beam, "Trader" O'Hara sailed his heavy-laden sloop well into the river mouth before he saw the whaleboat shoot out from behind the brush-covered sand spur on the north bank. The boat angled toward him, windward of the middle of the river, her small sail drawing full.

There were eight men in her, all equally

Copyright, 1945, Better Publications, Inc., originally published Nov. 1945, Rio Kid Western

able, O'Hara knew, at oars or rifles. Sleek black-haired Lafe Claggerty sat at the steering sweep. That gun-runner was the last man in the world whom Trader O'Hara wanted to see right now.

O'Hara knew he couldn't get past either side of the whaleboat. The men aboard her could run him down rowing or sailing, keep him broadside to their rifle fire. And O'Hara's thirty-foot sloop was too far into the river to turn against the making tide. Jibbing would bring him onto the southern bank. If he came about, the whaleboat would be on him before he could get under way back to the bay. There was no doubt that Claggerty had him in a bad spot.

Watching closely, Trader eased his sail to spill his wind and delay the meeting. Claggerty's schooner, from which the whaleboat had come, must be up the bay beyond the river mouth, in hiding and probably stove up from a brush with some Government cutter. Maybe all the gun-runner wanted was nails or tar or paint or rope, or even a spar. O'Hara traded with the settlements along the Texas rivers and would have a dozen things needed to patch up a vessel.

But more likely, Trader thought, Claggerty had learned of the new kind of guns he carried in the bottom of his hold. Claggerty would be after them. His business was to smuggle guns and ammunition to the marauding renegade Mexicans who had escaped capture at San Jacinto.

If the Mexicans got those guns, there would be no peace in the San Ricio country. And a trader was licked with the country on the warpath. O'Hara had learned that during this last winter and spring of 1836.

O'Hara's jaw tightened with determination. These guns he had were for the settlers. Many of them were his friends. He would have none of their blood on his hands. He would see his sloop at the bottom of the river before he would let Claggerty have the new weapons. Every nerve, every muscle in his block body tensed now as the smuggler's boat bore relentlessly down on him.

A HUNDRED yards away, the whaleboard suddenly rounded into the wind and lay broadside to the slowly moving sloop. O'Hara saw the brace of Navy pistols in Claggerty's belt as the man raised up and cupped hands to his mouth.

"We're coming aboard!" Claggerty bellowed across the water.

O'Hara saw his chance then. He tightened his sail. As she caught the breeze again, the sloop ploughed ahead.

"Heave to, Trader, or we'll blow you to Kingdom Come!" Claggerty roared.

"Not this trip, Lafe Claggerty!" O'Hara retorted.

The men at the oars backed the whaleboat a length. The rest of the crew aimed rifles over the side. A bullet slapped water to windward. O'Hara swung his bow straight at the whaleboat, making himself a small target.

Only then Claggerty read his purpose.

"Backwater!" he roared to his crew. "He'll run us down!"

Confusion gripped the boat. The oars churned white water. One man dropped his rifle and pulled on an oar. The one-sided effort swung the boat stern on to the charging sloop. The aim of the riflemen was spoiled by the rocking whaleboat.

Coolly O'Hara pushed the tiller down still more, to follow his opponent. His sail began to shake. But he had enough way to carry him the few feet and more. He hunkered into the protection of the cockpit as lead ploughed into the slooper's hull, knocked splinters from the coving. He recognized the double roar of Claggerty's Navy pistols, and winced as a ball burned across the back of his hand that gripped the tiller.

Still he held her, dead on. And the next instant came a jolt, the smashing of wood, then a scraping alongside. O'Hara pulled the tiller up then. But the sloop hung almost motionless. For one awful instant he knew she was dead in the wind's eye. A hand clutched the rail, then another, and a foot swung up. O'Hara reached for his gun.

Suddenly an erratic gust of wind wore the sloop around. Before O'Hara could

ease the sheet, the flattened sail caught the full force of the gust. The little sloop rolled to her beams' ends. Only her full cargo kept her from going over. The sudden upsurge flung the would-be boarders into the water. Then the sloop righted and ploughed on.

When O'Hara looked back, the whaleboat was rods astern. Her sail was ripped, her mast was splintered where the sloop's bowsprit had smashed through. Claggerty was fishing the two men out of the water. One man hung limply over the side. Others were collecting the smashed oars.

O'Hara was grim as his eyes swept the river ahead in the twilight. He knew he wasn't free of them yet. Unless the breeze held until he sailed the whole fifteen miles up the twisting river to Muldoon's Landing opposite San Ricio, Claggerty could overtake him with six men rowing. . . .

The breeze held steady for better than two hours. Trader O'Hara was within four miles of the landing when the full moon, poking over the eastern horizon, showed him the whaleboat hanging doggedly to his wake, a quarter of a mile astern. The rhythmic din of oars flashed in the bright night.

O'Hara looked ahead to where the river narrowed and bent northward. In that half-mile stretch before the river swung west again, he would have the wind dead against him, he would have to use his sculling sweep. The whaleboat, even with only six oars being used, could easily overhaul him. O'Hara loaded two rifles and laid them on the stern locker.

Guiding the sloop through the narrow channel, to shave the hidden sand-bar that protruded from the north shore, O'Hara made fifty yards northing before he was almost against the south bank. He let the sail go then and worked the little vessel with the scull.

Fifty, one hundred yards he made, and the whaleboat steadily closed the distance. A shot cracked out. The ball pinged water astern. Still O'Hara labored. But the second shot buried itself in his sweep. He ran forward to slash the anchor lashings. The hook plunged into the water and as it caught in the sandy bottom it brought the sloop up gently against the river current.

His only hope now was to fight them off. Their shot and powder could not last forever.

The whaleboat closed another fifty yards before the third shot chipped the rail close to O'Hara's head. Carefully he drew a bead on the men in the whaleboat. Over the echo of the shot, he heard a yell, and one of the crew slumped down. He caught up the second rifle, fired again. Another down. The rest of them dropped their oars and ducked down behind the high sides of the boat. They slowly drifted back downriver.

OUT OF RANGE, their boat put into shore. The crew scrambled out. Presently they had worked along the brush-covered bank opposite the sloop. With O'Hara after that it was shoot, cover up, ram shot and powder into his rifle and shoot again. Yet while his return fire never quite found them, his own cockpit began to look as though it had been through a Gulf hurricane where their lead had smashed his woodwork. O'Hara had a dozen scratches and bruises from flying splinters.

He came to a sudden decision. Dropping his hot rifle, he crawled forward with his sheath knife to slash at the anchor hawse. It was a ten-to-one shot that the current might drift him through the narrow channel instead of piling him onto the sand-bar, but below, where the river widened, he might get the sloop turned around. It was a desperate chance. But even if he went aground on the sand-bar he would be no worse off.

Suddenly O'Hara realized that the shooting had stopped. Even as the sloop began to drift he caught the familiar creak of a floor slat in his cockpit. He clutched his knife and swung around. And a voice spoke.

"Figgering to drift away, Trader?"

Lafe Claggerty stepped out of the cockpit onto the foredeck, holding O'Hara's own rifle. His wet, naked body glistened in the moonlight.

"Drop the knife!" the smuggler ordered. "We got business to talk over."

O'Hara swore as his fingers relaxed. Claggerty would shoot him down before he could make a move.

"I swum right out here under your nose. When you got so busy on that anchor, I figgered I'd come aboard and make a call." Lafe's broad chest heaved as he laughed at his own smartness.

"Yeah, nice play," O'Hara said. "What business we got?"

"Why, I want to make you a generous offer," Claggerty explained. "I'll forget you rammed me, I'll even forget you gunned two of my men if you talk sensible on this here cargo."

The big man was standing almost on the break of the deck, the three-foot drop into the cockpit behind him. The sloop was moving slowly with the river current. Far below, Trader saw men getting into the whaleboat again. They would be coming along soon. He was thinking then of that ten-to-one chance that the sloop would land on the sand-bar. There would be a jar, then she would swing slowly around broadside to the current. In a few hours she would be stuck tight.

"Can't see what you'd do with ploughshares, cooking pots, or horseshoes, Lafe," he said. "You ain't aiming to go farming, are you?"

Claggerty grinned. "Trader, you're a smart hombre, but you ain't fooling me. I want them guns you got. I could help myself to them but it's better if we work together. Come in with me and you'll leave this two-bit trading. Which same is the best deal I ever offered any gent."

Another twenty yards to the sand-bar, O'Hara estimated. The sloop was now swinging into the channel. The whaleboat had got into rifle range again. Only Claggerty himself could stop them now. O'Hara moved forward to lean carelessly against the mast.

"This gent I get the guns from wouldn't sell to you, Lafe."

"He'll sell to you," the big gun-runner rumbled. "I'll buy from you. I'll run them in my schooner. Make a nice profit for both of us."

Trader O'Hara seemed to consider, but behind his back, one hand was cautiously unhooking the single sheave block from the stubby cargo boom folded against the mast. The sloop still drifted.

"Who'll you sell to?" he asked.

"What dif—"

The sloop struck. The jar was just enough to make Claggerty lose his balance. He flung out an arm to save himself. O'Hara swung up the block and heaved it. It caught the big renegade beside the head, knocked him sprawling into the cockpit. The rifle went off, the ball whistling harmlessly across the water.

O'Hara's leap carried him clear over the man and onto the stern locker. Before the dazed Claggerty knew what was happening, O'Hara had ripped off the locker cover and snatched out a gun. With a single movement, he cocked and leveled it as the smuggler came to his feet.

"The new gun, Claggerty!" he shouted. "The business end of it!"

Claggerty's voice was thick. "You can't fight my whole crew."

"That's right. Get aft to the sweep." O'Hara moved quickly around him to the protection of the companionway. "Just tell your crew any shooting they do will get you. Now you can shove us off the sand-bar. Then keep on working that scull till we catch a wind. After that you can swim ashore. That's my bargain for you." O'Hara waved the gun. "Lively now!"

CUSTOMARILY Trader O'Hara sailed his loaded sloop as far up the larger Texas rivers as his three-foot draft and the wind would take him. He would establish a headquarters with some river settler while he called on the ranches and settlements in the vicinity in a hired wagon. This was faster and cheaper than an overland haul. At his headquarters he would store the hides and grain, cotton, jerked beef or whatever else he took in trade for the manufactured articles he brought into this country where cash was scarce.

Mike Muldoon's ranch had long been O'Hara's headquarters in the San Ricio

country. The stocky Irishman had built a little wharf into the river. He operated a ferry for the occasional travel between the San Ricio settlement, three miles to the north of the river, and the old Spanish ranches and settlements to the south. Muldoon's adobe building was roomy and safe, styled as it was like a Spanish casa grande with living quarters, bar and stables built around a patio.

Muldoon came down to the dock as the sloop came up the river. He shaded his rugged face against the morning sun as O'Hara glided in beside the ferry.

"Begorra, Trader," he called. "I was after thinkin' ye wasn't gettin' around this season. There's a good load waitin' in the barn for ye already, and I'm needin' my ploughshare and nails bad."

"I've been a powerful distance, Mike," O'Hara told him.

Mike Muldoon caught the line O'Hara tossed and made it fast.

"Your sloop sure got some battered," he said. "Thought I heard shootin' down river last night."

"I ran into Lafe Claggerty," O'Hara said, and was describing his trip when a woman's voice came down the path from the house. Mrs. Muldoon's voice.

"Well if it ain't that good-for-nothin' Trader O'Hara!" she was saying. "And if he didn't bring my kittle, it's no dinner he'll be gettin' in this house."

"You can bet I wouldn't miss a meal cooked by Missus Muldoon," Trader laughed.

"Begone with your flattery, ye smooth-tongued peddler."

O'Hara brought out the four-gallon iron kettle.

"It's the best I could buy in New York."

"So that's where ye bin lallygaddin' while good customers bin worryin' their heads over ye. Still I'm thinkin' ye could come by less mischief even in New York than New Orleans where ye ginerally fritter yer time." She was eyeing the kettle delightedly. "I'll leave the two of ye to yer gossippin', and don't ye come near my kitchen until I call ye." Mrs. Muldoon bustled away.

"Why was Claggerty so hot on your trail?" Mike demanded.

"I brought in a new kind of gun. It'll fire five shots without reloading."

"Sure, the devil and Claggerty would want something like that," Muldoon said. "I saw a pistol like that once though. It would shoot thrice. But it blew the feller's hand off the second time he shot it."

"This won't," O'Hara said, taking out the gun. "Every time you pull the hammer back, this cylinder revolves, bringing a chamber back of the barrel. It's locked there until you cock it again. See that post at the end of the dock?"

O'Hara raised the gun. Mike Muldoon hastily stepped aside. O'Hara cocked and triggered five times. Five slugs ploughed into the post. Loosening a pin, O'Hara pulled out the empty cylinder. From his pocket he took a freshly loaded cylinder, inserted it in the frame. He fired five more shots.

Muldoon's mouth dropped open. The whole business had taken less than a minute.

"Lad, where did ye get it?" he demanded. "In the right hands 'twill be the making of this country."

"It's called a Colt revolver," Trader explained. "Last spring I figgered there wasn't much sense going up the Brazos, with fighting going on and folks shifting around. So I hauled the sloop out on Galveston Island and took ship to New York to line up some new stock. I bumped into an old shipmate by name of Sam Colt. Sam was starting to manufacture a new gun. Hearing I was trading in Texas, he invited me out to the factory. I came away with fifty."

"Sure lad, if Claggerty could get his dirty hands on them he'd make a mint of money trading with the renegades," Muldoon predicted gloomily. "Not a settler down here would be safe."

"He won't get them," O'Hara said firmly. Sam made me his selling agent for the Republic of Texas. There ain't any more of these guns down here but the fifty I've got aboard the sloop."

"We better get them into the barn where

they'll be safe," Mike Muldoon advised. "Claggerty'll sure be coming after them."

BY DINNERTIME, with the help of Muldoon and his two hands, Trader O'Hara had the sloop's cargo stowed in the barn, all but the wagon load he was starting out with that afternoon.

As they sat down to the feast Mrs. Muldoon had prepared, O'Hara said:

"I figure to get the Colts sold as fast as I can. Tomorrow afternoon, Saturday, plenty folks will be in San Ricio. The quickest way will be to take all the guns in then."

"Good idea," Muldoon agreed. "They'll be safe here till then." He caught O'Hara's eye and went on. "You'll be going out past Peter Reilly's place this afternoon?"

Trader made a swift change of plans. "Yeah. Got a lot of stuff for Reilly. I'll go on and spend the night with old man Clancy, then swing past McMullen's to make it back here about noon.

"If ye're goin' to Peter Reilly's place, Trader, I'll be askin' a ride with ye," Mrs. Muldoon put in. "I haven't seen Missus Reilly in three months, and I hear she's doin' poorly."

O'Hara guessed then that Mike wanted to get rid of his wife, because he feared Claggerty would come here.

"You'll have the best seat on the wagon, Missus Muldoon," he said.

"Go along with ye, ye soft soaper," she said, and went to put on her bonnet.

Despite the new settlers along his route, Trader O'Hara did get back to Muldoon's by noon the next day. As he approached the buildings he had a sudden premonition of danger. The house somehow looked deserted, and there wasn't a horse to be seen out around. He saw his sloop riding to anchor in the river as he had left it.

Then he saw the whaleboat tied beside the ferry. Claggerty's whaleboat. O'Hara loosened his Colt and quickened the team.

The big double doors to the patio stood open. But Muldoon didn't come to meet him as he drove in.

"Mike!" he called. "Mike, it's O'Hara!" His voice fell flat against the adobe walls. A hog snorted at him disgustedly. A hog that hadn't been fed that morning.

He jumped down and ran into the barn. The neat pile of trading goods he had left was scattered around the floor. The cases of Colts which had been on the bottom were gone. Then he saw the blood stains.

He ran across the patio into the house. In the kitchen, huddled in a corner, was Mike Muldoon. A crude, blood-soaked bandage was tied across his chest. Though he was breathing, his face was ghastly under his beard.

O'Hara bent over him. Muldoon stirred and opened his eyes. A glimmer of recognition came into them.

"The guns!" he gasped. "Clag—" Weaknes stopped him.

O'Hara nodded. "Never mind. I'll get you fixed up."

He carried the rancher in to bed. Then he built a fire and put water on to boil. He got his small case of instruments out of the bedroll on the wagon. A traveling trader had to be all things—doctor as well as fighter and business man.

Three-quarters of an hour later, he had the slug extracted and Mike Muldoon bandaged and comfortable. Muldoon stirred and tried to sit up. O'Hara forced him back gently.

"Easy, old-timer."

He put a cup of hot water and rum to the rancher's mouth. Muldoon gained strength from it, and a smile played over his face.

"Fooled them," he muttered. "Even if they messed things."

"Claggerty?"

Muldoon nodded. He took another dram of the rum and water.

"Daybreak, Shorty come fogging in with news of rustlers. I sent everybody out, took them across the river on the ferry to save their horses. I'm just tying up again when a big rowboat comes around the bend with six jaspers rowing. The big, black-looking jasper in the back tells me it's Claggerty and his crew. I don't parley. I run for the house. But they down me with this here slug in the shoulder.

"Some of them look over the sloop, but

the big gent comes straight to the house. When they don't find a thing but the pile of your goods all scattered, they ask me where the guns are. I tell them a bunch of Injuns came in the middle of the night and took them, rode south. I tell them I wish I never seen the damn guns, they caused me so much trouble. So they grab my horses and light out. I make it into the kitchen before I keel over."

"And the guns?" O'Hara asked softly.

Mike chuckled. "I figgered things might pop. When you left yesterday I threw the boxes into the manure pit. I been shovelin' onto them ever since."

"I've got to get them out and hit for town pronto," O'Hara said. "What about you?"

"I'll be right enough. Shorty'll be along. But that bluff'll peter out." Claggerty'll be looking for you."

"Yeah," Trader O'Hara agreed grimly. "I reckon he'll find me too. The country ain't big enough for both of us no more. . . ."

SAN RICIO was filling with the Saturday night crowd, when O'Hara arrived late in the afternoon. Cowmen in wide-brimmed hats and high-heeled boots racked their ponies beside the buckboards of slow-moving farmers. O'Hara drove down the single street, waving to an acquaintance here and there.

But most of the faces were strange to him. Texas' independence from Santa Anna's tyrannical yoke was bringing new settlers into this country. And Trader O'Hara felt good about this. It meant that he could set up a trading post in any of these towns. He could be done with wandering and settle here.

But it all hinged on peace and stability. If these settlers were able to drive off the renegades that were a menace.

O'Hara pulled the wagon into the tree-bordered square in the center of town. He unhitched the team and took the animals to a livery stable. Then he lowered the tail-gate and climbed up, knowing that the sooner he got started with the business at hand, that much less time would Claggerty have to catch up with his cargo.

From the holsters on his hips, O'Hara drew the Colts and triggered ten quick shots into the air. The echoing crash of the guns hadn't died before people headed for the square. By the time O'Hara had filled his leather powder and shot pouch, curious men were filtering into the square.

He took time to load one revolver. Then he picked up an old Springfield pistol, held it up.

"Gents," he called, "this single-shot, flintlock pistol is the kind of weapon I see some of you wearing. What brought most of you here on the run was my shooting ten lead pills from this pair of Colt revolvers you see hanging around my waist. These Colts are going to make history, gents! They're called Patersons, after the town Sam Colt makes them in. Texans with these Colts can tame the Comanche warriors and wipe out the last of the enemy that escaped our army, or we ain't fit to be called Texans!"

O'Hara paused for the cheers that swept the square. Then lowering his voice, he spoke tensely.

"Gents, you all know there's jaspers among us, Texans as well as Mexicans we're ashamed to say, who figger to live by taking what you all worked hard for. You got to stomp out that kind first of all. God helps them who help theirselves. I aim to help you gents help yourselves. With this here Colt revolver."

He swept out the gun. The crowd stood breathless.

"I reckon all I need to tell you is how the blamed thing works," he said.

"Ain't we going to see it shoot?" a voice called.

"Just a minute now," Trader said. "You got to load a gun before you can shoot it." Someone laughed. Demonstrating, he explained. "Pull the hammer half back so the cylinder spins. Fill the five chambers from this self-measuring powder and shot pouch and ram it like you would any charge. With this automatic magazine, snap a percussion cap on the nipple at the back of each chamber."

Over the heads of the tensely watching

crowd, O'Hara saw riders moving down the street, and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rising. But he forced himself to remain calm as he pushed the gun, now loaded, into its holster.

"All you have to do," he said, "is cock the hammer and pull the trigger, five times. I'm selling only one to a customer, first come, first served. Complete with capping magazine, powder and shot pouch, and extra cylinder for twenty-five dollars. Or according to my custom—"

"I'll take all you got, Trader!" a voice from the back of the crowd interrupted.

Claggerty loomed over the crowd. "Stand back," he said sharply.

A lane opened between the wagon and the big smuggler with the two single-shot Navy pistols stuck into his belt. His crew had fanned out behind him, five of them, and another one held the horses up the street out of the way.

"Reckon you heard me say one to a customer and there's others ahead of you," O'Hara said quietly.

He hitched up his belts and stepped off the tail of the wagon. The best defense was always to strike first. He already had an advantage over the man even if there were six to back Claggerty's play.

But as O'Hara walked warily forward, despite the coolnes of the evening, sweat rolled down his back, cold on his skin.

Silence held in the square. O'Hara heard the scuff of his own boots. The dust they raised tickled his nostrils. The holstered guns slapping his thighs made him think how Sam Colt, wanting a perfect gun, had made him draw and shoot hour after hour at the factory last summer. Sam had made numerous minute changes in the shape of the butt, the length of the barrel, the trigger tension. O'Hara remembered how he had thought Sam was too finicky, then.

"We'll take the wagon and all, Trader!" Claggerty's voice hard and dangerous, halted him, as it cut across the twenty feet between them. "You can come along with us."

In a single flicker of his eyes, Trader O'Hara placed each one of the smug-

[*Turn page*]

SEE the World in Pictures

in America's Most

ENTERTAINING

Picture Magazine!

Packed with Fascinating

Photos and Features

Now on Sale—Only 15c Per Copy

A STIRRING NOVEL OF THE FIGHTING APACHES

WARRIOR of the DRAGOONS

By WILLIAM HOPSON

featured in the August

GIANT WESTERN

Now on Sale—25c at All Stands!

gler crew. He tried to figure how each man was going to act in the coming play.

"Wrong, Lafe," he said. "Only one of us is leaving here alive."

"Nobody ever swapped lead with me and walked away," Claggerty warned. "The offer I made on the sloop still holds."

O'Hara knew then that rumors of his fabled gun had got around. It made the smuggler uncertain. He played on that.

"I got the edge this time, Claggerty," he said. "This pair of Colts will fire ten shots to your two."

Claggerty's laugh was needlessly loud. Then O'Hara caught the quick motion of one of the crew. It was the breaking point. He angled sharply to the left as a heavy pistol roared. He snapped out his right-hand Colt to blaze back at the fellow.

Claggerty's hand blurred. Trader took the smuggler's first slug burning across his left elbow. He swung his Colt to trigger at Claggerty. The big man lurched.

"The wagon, boys!" the smuggler shouted. "I'll handle O'Hara!" He dragged at his second Navy pistol.

The pistol roared and O'Hara's hat whipped off. And the crew rushed forward. O'Hara turned his lead at the foremost of them, smashing them back until his hammer clicked on an empty gun. He tried for his left-hand gun, found his left arm had gone numb.

They were coming in again. Lead splashed about him.

"We want them guns!" someone shouted from the crowd. "Don't let these cutthroats get them!"

The crowd charged. Claggerty's outfit hesitated, then broke for their horses. O'Hara was left alone with the big smuggler.

O'Hara was still fumbling for his gun. Claggerty was weaving on his feet, his shirt-front dyed crimson. But he found the strength to drag a hide-out gun from his clothing.

Watching as if hypnotized, Trader O'Hara fought down his weariness. With supreme effort, he forced his almost paralyzed arm to the holster. Claggerty was cocking his pistol, both hands clamped around the butt to steady it, hate-filled eyes blazing.

Then O'Hara had his Colt free. He shifted it to his right hand. Even as Claggerty squeezed the trigger, the Colt barked. Just the double blast, then quiet. Claggerty lurched backward, stumbled and fell in a heap.

A heavy hand seemed to be pushing at O'Hara's chest. His knees felt like limp rags. He struggled to keep his feet under him as he weaved toward the wagon. He dropped the half-empty Colt and caught at the wheel. As he clumsily lowered himself, he wondered why he had grown so heavy.

The shooting and the shouting of the crowd over at the edge of the square had stopped now. Men came back to the wagon. Someone bent over Trader O'Hara. He struggled.

"Help me up! I got them guns to sell—to the right people."

The man laughed. "Why, amigo, them guns sold theirselves. What you need is a cashier."

Still O'Hara struggled. "I'll take hides or grain or—" He finished in a whisper, "Delivered to Muldoon's."

The man nodded, understanding. Even the new settlers in the country knew about Trader O'Hara now.

Then O'Hara relaxed. When he got around on his feet again he would have to go and see Sam Colt. Texas was a big country. Law-abiding folks would need plenty of these new guns.

Frontier Thrills in SCORPIONS OF SILVERADO, a Bob Pryor Novel by D. B. Newton in September RIO KID WESTERN—20c at All Stands!

by
LESLIE ERNENWEIN

COMICAL AS A CLOWN

Maybe Close Shave Pelky can fool those land speculators—but what about his wife?

PELKY, known as "Close-Shave" Pelky, was scanning the Tombstone *Epitaph's* front page when two fashionably garbed strangers entered his barbershop in Broken Bow shortly after noon. In addition to being the town's only barber, Close-Shave was a frustrated variety actor and the laziest man in Arizona Territory at this particular time.

The frustration was due to his having married a high-minded woman who considered stage-acting a piddling profession devoid of dignity and economic security. His lack of barbering ambition was a result of monopoly. If a man wanted tonsorial attention in Broken Bow he had to get it at Close-Shave's shop or go without.

Toil at any time was distasteful to Pelky, but during the heat of the day it was downright repugnant to him. So when the taller of the two strangers announced, "I'll have a shave," Pelky paid him no heed. And when the short, hog-jowled gentleman demanded, "Are you deaf?" Close-Shave had a brilliant inspiration.

At least it seemed so to him at the time. Here, he thought happily, was a magnificent opportunity to practice the profession his wife had badgered him into for-

Copyright, 1946, Better Publications, Inc., originally published Dec. 1946, Rio Kid Western

saking. These two dudes probably had got off the noon stage. They wouldn't know he was running a sandy on them if he made out that he was deaf and dumb.

Ignoring the pair of customers, Pelky turned to a story about the new railroad which was being built west from Lordsburg. The headline said:

NO BOOM FOR BROKEN BOW

Beneath it the story read:

According to Sylvester Smith and Johnathan Brown, officials of Arizona-Western, the new railroad will not lay its tracks through Broken Bow but will cross Dragoon Basin by way of Shirt Tail Flats and Soda Water Spring, some thirty miles north of the route originally planned.

The two railroad officials spent Monday in our fair metropolis, sampling the hospitality of the Crystal Palace Saloon and attending an evening performance at the Bird Cage Theatre. Upon making their departure, Messrs. Smith and Brown expressed high praise for Tombstone and bemoaned the fact that the big construction camp which they plan to erect on Shirt Tail Flats will be so far removed from this desert oasis.

Close-Shave sighed with genuine relief. For weeks he had dreaded the boom in business which had seemed destined to come when the railroad reached Broken Bow. He had flinched inwardly at the thought of shaggy-maned men crowding his barber shop from morn till night, wanting haircuts.

ONE of the strangers—the short, beefy-cheeked one, stepped over to Pelky and pushed the paper aside.

"Are you deaf?" he demanded.

Close-Shave blinked up at him as if startled, as if aware for the first time that there were customers awaiting service. This, he thought fleetingly, was his chance to convince himself that time hadn't tarnished his histrionic talent, that his rightful place was on a stage entertaining appreciative audiences instead of standing behind a barber-chair shearing the snarled locks of unschooled cowhands.

Smiling apologetically, Close-Shave pointed to an ear and sadly shook his head. Even his usually twinkling blue eyes took on a blank expression when he glanced at the tall man in his barber-chair and made a scissor-like gesture. The man shook his head, whereupon Pelky ran a finger down his own cheek. As the fellow nodded, Close-Shave smiled cheerfully.

"This galoot," the tall man said to his companion, "isn't just deaf, Greg. He's deaf and dumb."

Close-Shave Pelky felt as proud as seven peacocks. Exaltation flared high in him as he lathered his customer's hawk-featured face. This proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that he had not lost his fine flair for acting. He had successfully accomplished the difficult art of pantomime, hadn't he? And pantomime was the very epitome of theatrical performance!

For a time then, while beefy-cheeked Greg scanned the newspaper, the scrape of Pelky's razor was the only sound in the barbershop. And because Close-Shave's wife Abigail had consistently scoffed at his hope of one day returning to the stage, the bald-headed barber could scarcely wait to tell her about his success in the realm of histrionic endeavor.

For this was a success in every sense of the word—a real achievement. These two men were not gullible cowboys or ignorant sheepherders who would be taken in by an amateurish performance. Judging by their stylish garb they were big city men—a sharp and sensitive audience. And he had convinced them that he was deaf and dumb, by godfreys!

"From what the hotel proprietor said, business should be rushing at two-o'clock, Shad," Greg reflected smilingly.

"Not so loud!" the lathered man warned.

"He's stone deaf, isn't he? What you worrying about?"

"But somebody outside might hear you."

That didn't make sense to Close-Shave Pelky. Nor did their vague, low-voiced references to real estate. A couple of traveling salesmen, he guessed.

When both men had received Pelky's tonsorial attention, tall, hawk-faced Shad shouted:

"How much do we owe you?"

Close-Shave was momentarily embarrassed, baffled as to how he could tell them the amount of their indebtedness without revealing his ability to talk. For a hushed moment, while perspiration greased the bald dome of his head, Pelky stood stumped and chagrined. Then, recalling that this part depended on pantomime at its finest, he held up the knobby fingers and thumb of his left hand and fashioned a zero with his right.

Whereupon Shad handed him fifty cents and followed his hog-jowled partner out to the sidewalk.

Doc Plunkett, better known as "Parable" Plunkett because of his habitual spouting of fancy phrases, came into the barbershop. A dismal frown creased his age-mottled face as he hung his battered stove-pipe hat and shabby Prince Albert coat upon a hook.

"This is a sad day for Broken Bow," he lamented, and eased back in the barber chair with a long-drawn sigh.

"What's so sad about it?" Pelky asked.

"Haven't you read the *Epitaph?*"

CLOSE-SHAVE nodded, and lathered the old medico's face.

"Having the railroad go to Shirt Tail Flats instead of coming here doesn't hurt my feelings, Doc," he said. "There's enough barber business in Broken Bow right now to suit me."

"Of course," Plunkett said. "But there won't be if two-thirds of this town's population moves to Shirt Tail Flats, and that's exactly what will happen. Instead of being satisfied with a peaceful and leisurely way of life they are bemoaning the ghastly prank of frivolous fate which has caused the railroad to change its original plans. They are smitten with the bitter anguish of frustration and regret because our fair city is being shunned by the tremendous tramp of empire. It doesn't occur to them that Broken Bow's glorious traditions remain exactly as they were, that our salubrious climate and deathless heritage of untrammeled freedom are unchanged."

Pelky smiled, and industriously plied his razor. Doc, he reflected, was always making mountains out of mole hills. The old medico could sling more fancy words of wisdom on one drink of bourbon than any other man in Arizona Territory.

"Civic pride and greed for gold are this world's twin plagues of perdition," Plunkett muttered. "People are never satisfied with what they've got. Which reminds me of a fine bit of philosophy I once read, which goes something like this: 'God grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change, the courage to change things I can, and wisdom enough to know the difference.' "

"That," Close-Shave declared, "is the best I ever heard," and nodded to "Dude" Mulqueen, proprietor of the livery stable, who sauntered into the barbershop.

"It looks like this'll be a ghost-town for sure now," the little liveryman announced. "Two greenhorn pilgrims that ain't read the newspaper are offerin' to buy a lot of real estate here if enough folks will sell to make it worth while. They represent some big syndicate that buys houses on speculation. I reckon them two jiggers will have no trouble buyin' homes on Residential Avenue now that the railroad ain't comin' here."

Parable Plunkett voiced dismal agreement. "Everybody will move to Shirt Tail Flats, and Broken Bow will degenerate into a forlorn and fantastic scatteration of forsaken buildings."

Even Close-Shave Pelky began to feel a trifle worried. If such a thing came to pass there would be no one here to barber.

"Seems like somebody is sure to tell those speculators about the piece in the paper," Pelky said, endeavoring to bolster his courage.

"I already did," Dude said. "But it didn't do no good. They laughed it off as a rumor."

"Broken Bow is doomed," Parable Plunkett proclaimed, "and we, who cherish it so deeply, are doomed with it. Nothing can halt the immediate and wholesale departure of this town's citizens."

The misty wetness of unshed tears showed in Dude Mulqueen's faded eyes,

for Broken Bow was the only real home town he had ever known, and he loved it.

"If there was only some way to keep folks from sellin' out to them darn fool speculators," he muttered.

"Perhaps we could talk folks into not taking advantage of the real estate men," Close-Shave suggested, without much confidence. "Maybe if we threatened to tell those two greenhorns about the boom not coming here, folks would be ashamed of using such underhanded tactics."

Plunkett snorted. "Coin has no conscience," he declared, "and besides, there is nothing unethical about cheating a land shark, which is the lowest form of human existence. The only way those speculators could be stopped from buying would be for someone to outbid them. I've already tried to talk our new banker into doing that, but the impudent Johnny-Come-Lately laughed at me."

"Folks are gatherin' at the hotel now," Dude Mulqueen reported from the doorway. "The sale is supposed to start at two o'clock, and it looks like everybody that lives on Residential Avenue is there already."

Close-Shave stepped to the stoop. He peered at the Alhambra veranda, and saw what he had feared he might see. Abigail was there and she held a legal-looking document in her right hand—the deed to their home, he was sure!

WHEREUPON Pelky loosed a plaintive groan. Abigail would insist on selling for whatever the speculators would pay, and moving to the new boom town, sure as shooting. Nothing he could say would stop her. She had already called him a lazy lout for not wanting to see the boom come to Broken Bow. Now he would have to move his shop to Shirt Tail Flats and barber like a beaver from dawn till dark every day.

"Dadrat it all," he groaned. "If there was only some way to outbid those speculators."

"It would take a big bundle of hundred-dollar bills to do it," Doc Plunkett muttered.

A big bundle!

Those words rang a bell in Pelky's mind, made him remember the old theatrical trunk he had stored in the backroom long ago.

"By grab!" he blurted, so gustily that Plunkett and Mulqueen stared at him.

"What's bitin' ye?" the little Irishman inquired.

"An idea," Pelky declared. "A way I can outbid those speculators!"

"How?" Parable Plunkett demanded, which was the shortest utterance he had made in fifteen years.

"Follow me," Close-Shave suggested.

He went hastily into the backroom and lifted the lid of his battered trunk. Inside was an assortment of wigs, beards, false noses, grease paint and various makeup paraphernalia. Beneath them was a large bundle of what appeared to be a fortune in green and gold banknotes.

"Great Jehoshaphat!" Plunkett exclaimed. "Stage money galore!"

"Enough to save Broken Bow from becoming a ghost town," Close-Shave announced, and began selecting certain articles from the trunk.

"But it's the same as counterfeit," Mulqueen objected. "If ye buy anything with that stuff ye'll have to give it back when they find out the money is no good."

"Precisely," Close-Shave agreed, "but by then the speculators will be gone yonderly."

"Ah," Doc Plunkett said, an expansive smile creasing his scholarly face. "I see the light."

The old medico gave Pelky a stately and flourishing bow.

"Permit me to apologize profusely," he pleaded. "I have long known that you were an ex-Thespian of no little talent, but I never suspected you were an intellectual giant as well. Please pardon me for not recognizing your superb mental qualities, Close-Shave."

"What in the trumped up tarnation be ye talkin' about?" Dude Mulqueen demanded, completely mystified.

Close-Shave was perspiring now like a nervous thoroughbred being saddled for a

big race.

"There's no time to explain details, Dude," he said. "Have you got a good-sized valise at your livery?"

"I have, and what of it?" Dude asked.

"Then place it in a buggy, hitch a horse to the rig, and bring it around to the back door here, *muy pronto*. And don't let anyone see you doing it."

The liveryman stared at Pelky in bug-eyed astonishment.

"Be ye daft?" he demanded.

Parable Plunkett escorted him to the doorway.

"Do as Close-Shave suggests," Doc said, "and be quick about it, Dude. Take my word as a scholar and a gentleman that you will be contributing mightily toward the survival of our fair city."

It lacked ten minutes of being two o'clock when Close-Shave Pelky drove a dusty rig down Residential Avenue and turned into Main Street. No one witnessed his passage, for every home owner had answered the clarion call of the sale being held at the Alhambra Hotel.

But if anyone had seen Pelky they would not have recognized him. A brown derby with a light tan band rested atop a head of luxuriant black hair which merged with a full beard and swirling mustache. Be-ribboned pince-nez spectacles were perched high on the bridge of his nose. The fancy front of a flower-embroidered vest showed beneath a broadcloth tailed coat which smelled of moth balls, as did his fawn-colored California pants.

LEISURELY, as befits a gentleman of worldly wealth and wisdom, Pelky drove down Main Street. Beside him on the seat was a valise filled with what appeared to be genuine currency of the realm. And inside him was a tumult of excitement that rose higher and higher as he neared the Alhambra Hotel.

This, he reflected nervously, was like standing in the wings of a stage, awaiting his cue. No one in Broken Bow had ever seen him in this make-up. He felt safe enough on that score. But his voice, he feared, might give him away, unless he mastered the difficult technique of vocal fakery with considerable adroitness.

This, he realized perspiringly, would be the grand climax of his acting career. If he negotiated it successfully, Broken Bow would be spared the ignoble fate of becoming a ghost town. But should he fail or falter, if a single person in the crowd identified him, he would be derided to his dying day. And the shame of it would doubtless expedite his demise.

No actor, Close-Shave thought, had ever faced so monstrous a test of histrionic ability, nor risked so much derision. And Abigail would lead the avalanche of scornful abuse if he were exposed.

For a moment, as he eyed the throng that overflowed the hotel veranda, Close-Shave Pelky considered turning back. Even though he shared Parable Plunkett's deep affection and that of Mulqueen for this town, he wondered if it were worth so great a risk. His stage career, abandoned because of Abigail, was his only source of soul-satisfying pride. If the mellow nostalgia of that memory were obliterated by an ignoble failure here he would no longer be the proud possessor of a cherished dream. He would be just another round-shouldered barber shrouded in the sheer monotony of manipulating a razor.

At this exact moment, as Close-Shave teetered on the edge of beating a hasty retreat, the short, hog-jowled speculator mounted a chair.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he announced. "We are prepared to purchase every house on Residential Avenue—if the asking prices meets with our appraisal of its worth!"

Then the man Close-Shave remembered as Greg, glanced at the paper in his hand.

"First on the list," he said, "is the home of Abigail Pelky."

"Dadrat his soul," Close-Shave muttered, and hurriedly drove the livery rig up to the hotel hitchrack.

Greg smiled down at Abigail. He inquired:

"What is the price on your house, madam?"

BEFORE she could answer, Close-Shave stood up in the rig.

"Attention please!" he called in a voice pitched to pompous loudness. "The name, ladies and gentlemen, is Alexander Arlington Strathmore, but you may address me as Alex for short. I have just completed a survey of the property on Residential Avenue and am prepared to bid upon it, with your kind permission."

A flurry of exclamations ran through the throng, and Pelky glimpsed pleased smiles of anticipation on practically all faces turned toward him except those of the two speculators. Greg and Shad stared at him as if smelling something that fouled their nostrils.

"This is a privately arranged sale!" Greg shouted angrily. "By what authority do you impose your presence here?"

For reply Close-Shave tilted up the open valise so that all might see the bundled bills. "This is my authority," he announced with a dignified flourish. "And I believe it is sufficient."

Again there was a flutter of excited talk.

"I shall dispense with niggardly bartering and bickering for individual purchases," declared Pelky, striking a pose of chesty arrogance. "If some responsible and public-spirited citizen will suggest an average price per house, I shall offer a lump sum for all the property on Residential Avenue."

He glanced at Parable Plunkett who stood on the veranda steps, slyly smiling.

"You, sir," Pelky called, "have the appearance of a prominent and respected personage. Will you kindly consult with your fellow citizens as to the average asking price they wish to place upon their homes. I do not mean to hurry you good people, but I must depart for Tucson on urgent business within the hour."

Doc Plunkett followed his suggestion at once and, during this brief interval while Shad and Greg held whispered consultation, Close-Shave surreptitiously watched Abigail. Her face was flushed with excitement and she seemed to be arguing with Mrs. Stonecypher, a widow woman who lived next door to the Pelky domicile. Whatever the argument was about, Close-Shave felt confident that his wife would win it. She had a habit of winning.

"They have all agreed on five hundred dollars per house, without furnishings," Doc Plunkett called within five minutes.

A high price, Pelky reflected, considering there would be no railroad boom here, and no call for houses. Yet, to his astonishment, Greg shouted:

"We will buy at that price!"

"Then I shall be forced to offer five fifty per house," Close-Shave announced.

There was a burst of cheering, and the two speculators put their heads together again.

"Come, come," Pelky prompted impatiently. "Are you through bidding, gentlemen?"

"Five fifty-five," Greg snarled angrily.

"Have you no pride, man?" he asked. "A paltry five-dollar raise is an insult to my integrity as a liberal business man—and to these kind people assembled here. I offer six hundred per house!"

Another round of cheering.

"Six twenty-five," Greg shouted and wiped sweat from his glistening forehead.

"Seven twenty-five," Close-Shave said casually, without an instant's hesitation, and when the two scowling speculators gawked open-mouthed at this hundred-dollar raise, Pelky played a masterly stroke.

"I do not approve of fractional bids," he declared, "therefore I raise my own offer to eight hundred dollars!"

The eastbound stage from Tucson rolled into town then, but no one paid it any attention. For folks who had feared they would either have to live in a boomless town or abandon worthless real estate, were cheering lustily. Even Abigail was smiling joyously and joining in the praise for Alexander Arlington Strathmore. It was a spontaneous ovation.

CALMLY Close-Shave bowed in gracious acknowledgement, not once,

but twice. And then a third time. This, he thought exultantly, was his great histrionic achievement. Before the assembled multitude of his home town, he had gained the very pinnacle of Thespian success. And Abigail had scoffed at him, saying there was no dignity in this profession, that actors were the same as circus clowns. Yet what could be more dignified than this?

Never had Pelky known such soul-satisfying exaltation, such a soaring sense of total triumph. It dwarfed previous successes so that they seemed shallow; infinitesimal. All his life he had dreamed of being applauded by his friends and neighbors. All his life he had hoped and waited for this moment.

There was a salty sting in Pelky's eyes and a lump in his throat as he bowed again, and glimpsed the two speculators boarding the eastbound stage. Now all he had to do was accomplish a graceful exit, so that none of these smiling people would recognize him. And because he had already planned for this important part of the role he was playing, Pelky basked in a feeling of complete confidence as the stagecoach departed in a swirl of wheel-churned dust.

Beckoning to Parable Plunkett, he called:

"Please gather the individual deeds, my good man, and bring them to me. If they are all signed and in proper order I shall give you the entire amount of money for distribution to the owners."

It was the work of a moment for Doc Plunkett to gather the deeds, which he smilingly toted to Pelky.

"Seventeen of them," he said.

"Seventeen," Pelky mused, having already tallied the total in his mind. "Let me see now, that calls for h'm-m, seventeen times eight hundred would be thirteen thousand, six hundred dollars."

He made a great show of counting the bundles of bills and presently placed them in Plunkett's arms.

"Is that correct?" he asked, with a benevolent smile.

[*Turn page*]

High School Course at Home — **Many Finish in 2 Years**

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work — prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. H-658, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

Be a DETECTIVE

A CHALLENGE FROM WASHINGTON D.C.!

Help Stop Crime! Train at home. Earn big money. Amazing training course from the NATIONS CAPITOL (center of law enforcement) by former U.S. GOVT. AGENT and NAVAL INTELLIGENCE Officer exposes actual methods used by Criminals. Write for FREE BOOK. State age.

INTERNATIONAL DETECTIVE TRAINING SCHOOL

1701 Monroe St., N.E. Dept. 199 Washington 18, D. C.

Find HIDDEN TREASURES

GEIGER COUNTERS for Uranium Detection (see at left). TREASURE DETECTORS for gold, silver, etc. Light-weight, ultra sensitive. None finer at ANY PRICE. New Models available.

INFORMATION FREE

Detectron CO. Dept. TF-6

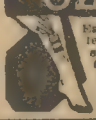
5631 Cahuenga, No. Hollywood, Calif.

FREE—Amazing Book on RHEUMATISM, ARTHRITIS

If you suffer the aches, pains and discomforts of Rheumatism, as manifested in ARTHRITIS, NEURITIS, SCIATICA or LUMBAGO, send today for the FREE Book. It reveals important facts about why drugs and medicine give only temporary relief without removing causes. Explains fully a proven, specialized system of treatment that may save you years of distress. No obligation. Write for this FREE Book today!

BALL CLINIC, Dept. 504, Excelsior Springs, Mo.

OLD LEG SORES



Easy to use Viscose Application. Heals many old leg sores caused by leg congestion, varicose veins, swollen legs and injuries or no cost for trial if it fails to show results in 10 days. Describe your trouble and get a FREE BOOK.

T. G. VISCOSE COMPANY

140 N. Dearborn St. Chicago 2, Ill.

Free Yourself FROM Tobacco Habit

If you want to stop smoking and just can't, try world-famous NO-TO-BAC Lozenges. See how quickly NO-TO-BAC may help stop your craving for tobacco. Don't wait! Rush $1 to NO-TO-BAC, for 7 days supply. If you can quit for 7 days, you've won half the battle. Satisfaction guaranteed or money back. Write:

NO-TO-BAC CO.

DEPT. S, HEWLETT, NEW YORK

YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE

in Every Issue of

EVERYDAY ASTROLOGY

★ NOW ON SALE-25c *At All Stands*

Hiya, Folks! Here's the Best in Western Reading!

THRILLING PUBLICATIONS feature Western yarns written by America's top hand writers—novels, novelets and stories of the range packed with plenty of rip-roaring action that keeps you riding tight in the saddle!

Here are tales of the colorful, roistering Frontier—the excitement and glamour of the rodeo arena—the heartbeats of Western romance! Whatever your taste in Western reading—there's A THRILLING PUBLICATION built to your order!

THRILLING WESTERN
GIANT WESTERN
MASKED RIDER WESTERN
POPULAR WESTERN
RANGE RIDERS WESTERN
RIO KID WESTERN
RANCH ROMANCES
TEXAS RANGERS
THRILLING RANCH STORIES
TRIPLE WESTERN
EXCITING WESTERN
WEST
FIVE WESTERN NOVELS

•

When You Visit Your Favorite Newsstand, Look for the Brand

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

ON THE COVERS OF THE MAGAZINES YOU BUY!

"Absolutely correct, complete and quite convincing," Plunkett acknowledged with a note of genuine admiration in his voice.

"Then I shall be going," Close-Shave said casually.

He removed his derby and saluted the crowd, wanting to make this final gesture a fitting finale.

Then, because the heavy wig and resultant perspiration itched annoyingly, he used his coat sleeve to wipe his forehead —with somewhat startling results. The ribbon of his pince-nez caught in a button of the upswung cuff, jerking the glasses from his nose, and the swipe of the sleeve across his moist brow caused the wig to slip back so that his bald head was exposed.

"Lookee!" a small boy on the fringe of the crowd called with youthful exuberance. "He's got false hair!"

"That money might be false, too!" a man exclaimed suspiciously. "Let me take a good look at it, Doc!"

Confusion clawed at the tattered remnants of Close-Shave's confidence. Yet even then he thought he had a chance to escape identification. If he could get away without being recognized these folks would think he was some crazy crook who couldn't come back to claim his ill-gotten real estate.

His beard and mustache were still intact. All he had to do was get out of town, abandon the rig and sneak into the barber shop by a back alley. He had picked up the reins and was going to make a run for it when his wife screamed:

"Close-Shave Pelky, you scoundrel!"

Pelky wilted. He sat like a man too weak to move as Abigail rushed up to the rig and snatched off his false beard.

"Why you—you miserable faker!"

"He cheated us out of a chance to cheat them speculators!" the Widow Stonecypher wailed hysterically.

A veritable hail of accusation assaulted Pelky's ears.

"Where's Sheriff Sam?" a man shouted. "Pelky should be arrested for passing counterfeit money!"

"We don't need Sam," another man

yelled. "We'll tar and feather the skunk and run him out of town!"

Close-Shave groaned.

HE HAD foreseen derision and scorn if he should fail, but he hadn't expected reprisal in the form of physical violence. Fear and foreboding weighted him like a monstrous burden. Shame bowed his head until he sat slumped with chin on chest while irate citizens snatched their deeds from the buggy seat.

What an end to his fond memories of a theatrical past! What an ignoble climax to his secret hopes of future accomplishment in the art of acting! All that was shattered now, gone like his youth. Gone as completely.

Parable Plunkett elbowed his way to the buggy.

"A most unfortunate accident, but your plan was a success in spite of it," Doc sympathized. "The real-estaters have departed, so Broken Bow has been saved from abandonment. I shall explain this whole affair to everyone's satisfaction."

"But they won't be satisfied," Close-Shave said miserably. "They know I kept them from selling their homes to the greenhorns for real money. I—I guess they'll run me out of town, Doc. I guess they'll hate me as long as they live."

Which was when a portly stranger strode over from the Wells Fargo stage station and declared:

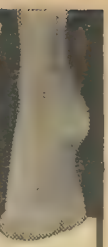
"If you folks are perturbed about that article in the Tombstone *Epitaph* let me report that it's utterly erroneous. My name is Sylvester Smith, general manager of Arizona-Western, and I have never been in Tombstone. Neither has my assistant, Johnathan Brown. Someone has obviously impersonated us for nefarious reasons known only to themselves."

"Do you mean to stand there and tell us that the railroad ain't goin' to Shirt Tail Flats—that it's comin' to Broken Bow like originally planned?" the Widow Stonecypher called in a high-pitched voice.

"It most certainly is," Smith assured her. "That's why I'm here—to arrange

[*Turn page*]

MAKE MONEY WITH FREE STOCKING



Earn steady extra cash writing orders for amazing Kendex nylons that are replaced FREE if they run or snag within guarantee period! Not sold in stores. Nationally advertised. Complete line, including sheerest 15 denier 51 and 60 gauge. No experience needed. Just show free stocking. We deliver and collect. Advance cash plus big bonus. Send your name and address on postcard. We'll rush you complete money-making outfit (including free sample stocking) free and prepaid. No obligation. Nothing to pay now or later.

KENDEX CORP., BABYLON 443, N.Y.

SEND FOR THIS FREE!

Make money. Know how to break and train horses. *Write today for this book FREE*, together with special offer of a course in Animal Breeding. If you are interested in Gaiting and Riding the saddle horse, check here ( ) *Do it today—now.*

BEERY SCHOOL OF HORSEMANSHIP
Dept. 829 Pleasant Hill, Ohio

Free for Asthma

If you suffer with attacks of Asthma and choke and gasp for breath, if restful sleep is difficult because of the struggle to breathe, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Company for a FREE trial of the FRONTIER ASTHMA MEDICINE, a preparation for temporary symptomatic relief of paroxysms of Bronchial Asthma. No matter where you live or whether you have faith in any medicine under the sun, send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing.

FRONTIER ASTHMA CO. 70-J FRONTIER BLDG.
462 NIAGARA ST. BUFFALO 1, N. Y.

RUPTURE

RELIEF...OR YOUR MONEY BACK
Simple, easy to wear truss made by old surgical house. *You* risk nothing. Write for free booklet. Don't delay.

WEB TRUSS CO. Dept. TF-9 Hagerstown, Md.

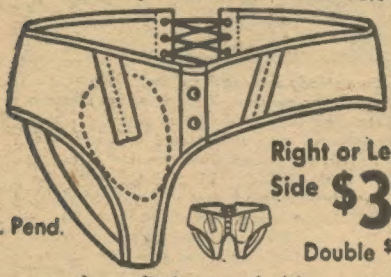
Banish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redeemer. Write for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved many men.

In Business Since 1909
300,000 Satisfied Customers
THE NEWELL COMPANY
189 Clayton Sta., St. Louis 5, Mo.

FREE BOOK

Read the Best Westerns and Mysteries in
POPULAR LIBRARY Editions
"Books of Proven Merit"—Only 25c Each!

Immediate Comfort
And Relief for You with
RUPTURE-EASER
(A PIPER BRACE PRODUCT)
for MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN



Right or Left Side $3.95
Pat. Pend.
Double $4.95

A strong, form fitting washable support designed to give you relief and comfort. Adjustable back-lacing and adjustable leg straps. Snaps up in front. Soft flat groin pad—**NO STEEL OR LEATHER BANDS.** Unexcelled for comfort, **INVISIBLE UNDER LIGHT CLOTHING.** Washable. Also used as after operation support.

- **THE MOST EFFECTIVE HERNIA SUPPORT.** Thousands of people who have tried old-fashioned, expensive devices turn to Rupture-Easer for new comfort.
- **RUPTURE-EASER IS SANITARY.** Can be washed without harm to fabric—you never offend when you wear Rupture-Easer.
- **NO FITTING REQUIRED.** Just measure around the lowest part of the abdomen and specify right or left side or double.

Over 250,000 Grateful Users

R. C. of Corvallis, Oregon, Air Mails: *"Send me another Rupture-Easer so I will have one to change off with. It is enabling me to work at top speed at my press machine 8 hours a day."*
M. S. of Anderson, Ind., thanks us and says: *"It is one of the finest things I have ever worn and has made my life worth living. It has given me untold ease and comfort."*
O. B. R. of Boston: *"Send me another . . . I wish to say to everyone who suffers as I did, 'Oh what relief I have found from its help!'"*
Blessed Relief Day and Night—You can sleep in it—you can work in it—you can bathe in it.

10-DAY TRIAL OFFER
Money-back guarantee if you don't get relief
Piper Brace Company, Dept. TF-91
811 Wyandotte, Kansas City 6, Mo.

PIPER BRACE CO., DEPT. TF-91
811 Wyandotte, Kansas City 6, Mo.
Please send my RUPTURE-EASER by return mail.

Right Side	☐ $3.95	Measure around lowest part of
Left Side	☐ $3.95	my abdomen
Double	☐ $4.95	is ..... INCHES.

(Note: Be sure to give Size and Side when ordering.)
We Prepay Postage except on C.O.D.'s.
Enclosed is: ☐ Money Order ☐ Check for $_____ ☐ Send C.O.D.

Name.....
Address.....
City and State.....

RUSH THIS COUPON NOW!

sites for a station, construction camp and commissary headquarters."

A strict hush settled on Main Street. For a dozen seconds, while the significance of Smith's declaration seeped slowly through the welter of confusion in Close-Shave Pelky's mind, no one moved nor spoke.

Then a man on the hotel veranda shouted:

"So that's why them two speculators was so anxious to buy our homes! They must've been the ones that got that piece put in the paper, so's they could bamboozle us into sellin' for a song!"

"Eureka!" Parable Plunkett exclaimed and, climbing into the livery rig, forced Close-Shave Pelky to stand where all could see him.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Parable bellowed. "Allow me to present the man who foiled as brazen a pair of scoundrels as ever invaded Broken Bow. Except for his foresight and theatrical artistry that pair of plundering rascals would now possess your domiciles and you would have no recourse through law, for they could claim you were endeavoring to cheat them. How about three ringing cheers for the finest actor west of the Pecos?"

A wild tumult of cheering was punctuated by shrill shouts of praise for Pelky. It was like a fantastic dream to Close-Shave, like a drama come true. Once again he was on stage, listening to the sweetest sound an actor can hear—the spontaneous applause of an appreciative audience.

He bowed in dignified fashion, giving gracious acknowledgement to the sustained cheering. Then he absent-mindedly backed toward where the wings would be if this had been a stage—and fell sprawling from the buggy.

He was sitting in the dust, utterly bewildered, when he heard Parable Plunkett announce:

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, should convince you that Close-Shave Pelky is also the most comical actor in Arizona Territory!"

"Yeah," Close-Shave agreed forlornly, "comical as a clown."

Build a Fine Business — FULL or SPARE TIME!

START RIGHT! DON'T INVEST A CENT FOR

BIG MONEY

WITH FAST SELLING

MASON JACKETS and COATS

FREE SELLING OUTFIT

We Show You How To Make Money From Very FIRST Hour!

Start your big business, backed by this 47-year-old, million-dollar company! We furnish FREE SELLING OUTFIT—How-To-Do-It instructions that help you take orders QUICK! You get practical Sales Hints — monthly newspaper with plans that WORK — Customer Gifts that bring "Automatic Sales"! CASH IN QUICK — build highly profitable Repeat Business!

SILVER GRAY TACKLE TWILL JACKET →

Men everywhere waiting for you to show and SELL them this high-style new jacket of gleaming, lustrous tackle-twill so tough it's used in making football pants. Included in FREE selling outfit. Write TODAY.

← MILITARY GABARDINE TRENCH COAT

Smart, masculine military style coat SELLS FAST to men who want rain-protection with smart styling, long wear. Also leather jackets, raincoats, colorful Jac-Shirts. Get FREE Outfit NOW!

FOLLOW THESE TOP MEN TO EXCEPTIONAL PROFITS

"I have had many experiences selling as many as 5, 6, and 7 pairs in one sitting. I received a phone call from one party, who wanted 2 pairs of shoes. I went to his store and made 7 sales."

Harry R. Williamson

"For four years, my average weekly earnings have been around $80.00 per week — I couldn't have done it except for the liberal commissions paid by the Company on this wonderful line of shoes and garments above and beyond competition."

Charles Tuttle

MAKE EXTRA CASH SELLING SHOES

Everybody buys shoes! Nation's Leading line offers over 150 styles, finest comfort-shoes for work, dress, sport. Fit Men and Women!

Guaranteed by Good Housekeeping

GOOD HOUSEKEEPING SEAL OPENS DOORS, CLINCHES SALES!

When you mention "Good Housekeeping", women everywhere KNOW YOU OFFER FINE SHOES — hesitation ends — sales come easier than ever!

EXCLUSIVE! Velvet-eez AIR CUSHION SELLS SHOES FAST

Thousands of tiny air bubbles give buoyant arch support, provide all-day-long comfort . . . . and EVERYBODY wants foot comfort!

POWERFUL NATIONAL ADVERTISING

You get the benefit of big, powerful ads in Good Housekeeping, scores of other national magazines! Millions KNOW MASON — we pay the bills to help you become known as the Factory-trained Mason Shoe Fitter in your town!

GET FREE SELLING OUTFIT!

Get into the BIG MONEY right away! Send for your outfit today, be in business next week! as the direct factory Salesman of the Leader in the Industry! DON'T DELAY — WRITE TODAY!

RUSH COUPON NOW!

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.
Dept. M-792, Chippewa Falls, Wis.

Help me build a Fine Business selling Jackets, Raincoats, and EXCLUSIVE Feature Shoes. RUSH me your FREE Selling Outfit, including Tackle-Twill Jacket, Velvet-eez Air Cushion shoes, unique Zipper shoes, other fast-selling items. Send everything FREE and POSTPAID. My own shoe size is (.....)

Name .....

Address .....

City & State .....

MASON SHOE MFG. CO.

Dept. M-792 Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin

YOU'VE DREAMED OF OWNING A GIANT UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY LIKE THIS!

TAKE IT FREE!

as Your Gift for Joining "America's Biggest Bargain Book Club"!

This Brand-New 1951 World Edition of

IT WOULD COST YOU $26.50 AT RETAIL!

WEBSTER'S UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY

2396 PAGES! SHIPPING WEIGHT OVER 11 LBS!

Nearly 400,000 Definitions! Maps! Gazetteers! Glossaries!

BRAND NEW!

A Dozen Volumes in ONE!

NEWLY REVISED EDITION!

A Truly MAMMOTH Volume: Actual Size 9" by 12" by FIVE INCHES THICK

Shipping Weight Over 11 Lbs.

United Nations Charter

- Chronology of World War II
- Constitution of U.S.A.
- Chronology of U. S. History with Most Important Happenings
- Atlas of the World, with Special Map Section in COLOR
- Population Statistics of EVERY U. S. City and Town
- Principal Commercial and Financial Terms in EIGHT LANGUAGES
- Glossary of 5,000 Words Often Mispronounced

Plus Dozens of OTHER self-pronouncing Dictionaries!

No home should be without it!

AT LAST you can own the UNABRIDGED WEBSTER'S NEW 20TH CENTURY DICTIONARY in the mammoth 2396-page volume pictured here!

You do NOT pay the regular retail price of $26.50 for this distinguished Work—you get it FREE as your introduction to the many special advantages of membership in "America's Biggest Bargain Book Club."

Defines Nearly 400,000 Words

Between the handsome, gold-stamped covers of your Webster's Unabridged Dictionary lies everything you've ever wanted to know about the language you use every day—and about hundreds of *other* everyday subjects, as well.

A DOZEN Volumes In One

This massive Work opens up for you a whole world of latest facts about famous people, events, places, sciences, arts, professions, etc. It spells, pronounces, defines, and traces the origin of nearly 400,000 words and phrases! Includes a World Atlas; a Glossary of over 5,000 Words Most Often Mispronounced; Pronouncing Dictionaries of foreign, technical, commercial terms; how to write letters, greet others, etc. It has been called the most comprehensive, up-to-date Dictionary in use today!

Act AT ONCE

This amazing offer may never be repeated—so fill in the valuable coupon below—mail it TODAY—and almost *overnight* you will have your giant FREE WEBSTER'S UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY to use and enjoy for a lifetime!

OVER 3,000 PICTURES!

Not published by original publishers of Webster's Dictionary or successors.

Mail WITHOUT MONEY to
BOOK LEAGUE OF AMERICA
Dept. TFG-9, Garden City, N. Y.

Send me—FREE—the brand-new giant WEBSTER'S NEW 20th CENTURY UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY, 2396 pages, weighing 11 lbs., nearly 400,000 definitions, and enroll me as a member. Also send me as my first Club Selection, the new best-seller checked here:

☐ Joy Street ☐ Infinite Woman
☐ Proud New Flags ☐ Fort Everglades

The best-selling books I choose hereafter may be either the *regular* Selections or any of the *other* popular books described in the Club's monthly "Review." Although the same titles may be selling for $3 or more at retail, I am to pay only the Club's special low members' price of $1.49 each, plus few cents shipping charges; and I may cancel my subscription at any time after buying twelve books from the Club. No dues to pay; no further cost or obligation.

GUARANTEE: If not delighted, I will return all books in 7 days, cancelling this membership.

Mr. / Mrs. / Miss .....
(Please Print Plainly)

Address .....

City..... Zone No. (if any).....State.....

Slightly higher in Canada: Address, 105 Bond Street, Toronto 2. (Offer good in U. S. and Can. only).

SEND NO MONEY! PAY POSTMAN NOTHING!

Simply mail coupon WITHOUT MONEY—and your mammoth WEBSTER'S UNABRIDGED DICTIONARY will be sent to you *immediately*, as a new membership GIFT from Book League. Most amazing, you will *pay nothing, owe nothing*, for this volume! WITH it will come either the best-seller "Joy Street," or any OTHER book you select in coupon.

You Choose Your Own Best-Sellers!

Thereafter you will CONTINUE to receive YOUR OWN CHOICE of best-selling new books by famous authors like Steinbeck, Maugham, Hemingway. You choose after reading an advance description of each book in the Club's free "Review."

Your Savings Are TREMENDOUS!

Although the book you select each month may sell at retail for $3.00 or more, YOU pay only the bargain price of $1.49, plus few cents for shipping—a saving of up to $1.50!

SEND NO MONEY!

Mail coupon NOW—WITHOUT MONEY—and enjoy this most generous gift in Book League history. Enjoy, too, the best-seller you select in the coupon. Remember, your pleasure is GUARANTEED! *BOOK LEAGUE OF AMERICA, Dept. TFG-9, Garden City, N. Y.*

—And You Also Get This Big Best-Seller

JOY STREET
By Frances P. Keyes
Nation's No. 1 Hit!

Or, Take One of *THESE*:

PROUD NEW FLAGS
By P. Van Wyck Mason

THE INFINITE WOMAN
By Edison Marshall

FORT EVERGLADES
By Frank G. Slaughter

20¢ • BEST ACTION WESTERN STORIES • TEXAS RANGERS • SEPT. 19

SCAN COURTSEY OF
EXCITER